



# WAR OF 1812

Soon after Jefferson retired from the presidency in 1808, Congress ended the embargo and the British relaxed their policies toward American ships. Despite the embargo's unpopularity, Jefferson still believed that more time would have proven that peaceable coercion worked. Yet war with Britain loomed—a war that would galvanize the young American nation.

The War of 1812 stemmed from American entanglement in two distinct sets of international issues. The first had to do with the nation's desire to maintain its position as a neutral trading nation during the series of Anglo-French wars, which began in the aftermath of the French Revolution in 1793. The second had older roots in the colonial and Revolutionary era. In both cases, American interests conflicted with those of the British Empire. British leaders showed little interest in accommodating the Americans.

Impressments, the practice of forcing American sailors to join the British Navy, was among the most important sources of conflict between the two nations. Driven in part by trade with Europe, the American economy grew quickly during the first decade of the nineteenth century, creating a labor shortage in the American shipping industry. In response, pay rates for sailors increased and American captains recruited heavily from the ranks of British sailors. As a result, around 30 percent of sailors employed on American merchant ships were British. As a republic, the Americans advanced the notion that people could become citizens by renouncing their allegiance to their home nation. To the British, a person born in the British Empire was a subject of that empire for life, a status they could not change. The British Navy was embroiled in a difficult war and was unwilling to lose any of its labor force. In order to regain lost crewmen, the British often boarded American ships to reclaim their sailors. Of course, many American sailors found themselves caught up in these sweeps and "impressed" into the service of the British Navy. Between 1803 and 1812, some six thousand Americans suffered this fate. The British would release Americans who could prove their identity, but this process could take years while the sailor endured harsh conditions and the dangers of the Royal Navy.

In 1806, responding to a French declaration of a complete naval blockade of Great Britain, the British demanded that neutral ships first carry their goods to Britain to pay a transit duty before they could proceed to France. Despite loopholes in these policies between 1807 and 1812, Britain, France, and their allies seized about nine hundred American ships, prompting a swift and angry American response. Jefferson's embargo sent the nation into a deep depression and drove exports down from \$108 million in 1807 to \$22 million in 1808, all while having little effect on Europeans. Within fifteen months Congress repealed the Embargo Act, replacing it with smaller restrictions on trade with Britain and France. Although efforts to stand against Great Britain had failed, resentment of British trade policy remained widespread.

Far from the Atlantic Ocean on the American frontier, Americans were also at odds with the British Empire. From their position in Canada, the British maintained relations with Native Americans in the Old Northwest, supplying them with goods and weapons in attempts to maintain ties in case of another war with the United States. The threat of a Native uprising increased after 1805 when Tenskwatawa and Tecumseh built their alliance. The territorial governor of Illinois, William Henry Harrison, eventually convinced the Madison administration to allow for military action against the Native Americans in the Ohio Valley. The resulting Battle of Tippecanoe drove the followers of the Prophet from their gathering place but did little to change the dynamics of the region. British efforts to arm and supply Native Americans, however, angered Americans and strengthened anti-British sentiments.

Republicans began to talk of war as a solution to these problems, arguing that it was necessary to complete the War for Independence by preventing British efforts to keep America subjugated at sea and on land. The war would also represent another battle against the Loyalists, some thirty-eight thousand of whom had populated Upper Canada after the Revolution and sought to establish a counter to the radical experiment of the United States.

In 1812, the Republicans held 75 percent of the seats in the House and 82 percent of the Senate, giving them a free hand to set national policy. Among them were the "War Hawks," whom one historian describes as "too young to remember the horrors of the American Revolution" and thus "willing to risk another British war to vindicate the nation's rights and independence." This group included men who would remain influential long after the War of 1812, such as Henry Clay of Kentucky and John C. Calhoun of South Carolina.

Convinced by the War Hawks in his party, Madison drafted a statement of the nation's disputes with the British and asked Congress for a war declaration on June 1, 1812. The Republicans hoped that an invasion of Canada might remove the British from their backyard and force the empire to change their naval policies. After much negotiation in Congress over the details of the bill, Madison signed a declaration of war on June 18, 1812. For the second time, the United States was at war with Great Britain.

While the War of 1812 contained two key players—the United States and Great Britain—it also drew in other groups, such as Tecumseh and the Indian Confederacy. The war can be organized into three stages or theaters. The first, the Atlantic Theater, lasted until the spring of 1813. During this time, Great Britain was chiefly occupied in Europe against Napoleon, and the United States invaded Canada and sent their fledgling navy against British ships. During the second stage, from early 1813 to 1814, the United States launched their second offensive against Canada and the Great Lakes. In this period, the Americans won their first successes. The third stage, the Southern Theater, concluded with Andrew Jackson's January 1815 victory outside New Orleans, Louisiana.

During the war, the Americans were greatly interested in Canada and the Great Lakes borderlands. In July 1812, the United States launched their first offensive against Canada. By August, however, the British and their allies rebuffed the Americans, costing the United States control over Detroit and parts of the Michigan Territory. By the close of 1813, the Americans recaptured Detroit, shattered the Indian Confederacy, killed Tecumseh, and eliminated the British threat in that theater. Despite these accomplishments, the American land forces proved outmatched by their adversaries.

After the land campaign of 1812 failed to secure America's war aims, Americans turned to the infant navy in 1813. Privateers and the U.S. Navy rallied behind the slogan "Free Trade and Sailors' Rights!" Although the British possessed the most powerful navy in the world, surprisingly the young American navy extracted early victories with larger, more heavily armed ships. By 1814, however, the major naval battles had been fought with little effect on the war's outcome.

With Britain's main naval fleet fighting in the Napoleonic Wars, smaller ships and armaments stationed in North America were generally no match for their American counterparts. Early on, Americans humiliated the British in single ship battles. In retaliation, Captain Philip Broke of the HMS *Shannon* attacked the USS *Chesapeake*, captained by James Lawrence, on June 1, 1813. Within six minutes, the *Chesapeake* was



As pictured in this 1812 political cartoon published in Philadelphia, Americans lambasted the British and their native allies for what they considered "savage" offenses during war, though Americans too were engaging in such heinous acts. William Charles, A scene on the frontiers as practiced by the "humane" British and their "worthy" allies, Philadelphia, 1812. Library of Congress.

destroyed and Lawrence mortally wounded. Yet the Americans did not give up as Lawrence commanded them, "Tell the men to fire faster! Don't give up the ship!" Lawrence died of his wounds three days later, and although the *Shannon* defeated the *Chesapeake*, Lawrence's words became a rallying cry for the Americans.

Two and a half months later the USS *Constitution* squared off with the HMS *Guerriere*. As the *Guerriere* tried to outmaneuver the Americans, the *Constitution* pulled along broadside and began hammering the British frigate. The *Guerriere* returned fire, but as one sailor observed, the cannonballs simply bounced off the *Constitution's* thick hull. "Huzzah! Her sides are made of iron!" shouted the sailor, and henceforth, the *Constitution* became known as "Old Ironsides." In less than thirty-five minutes, the *Guerriere* was so badly damaged that it was set aflame rather than taken as a prize.

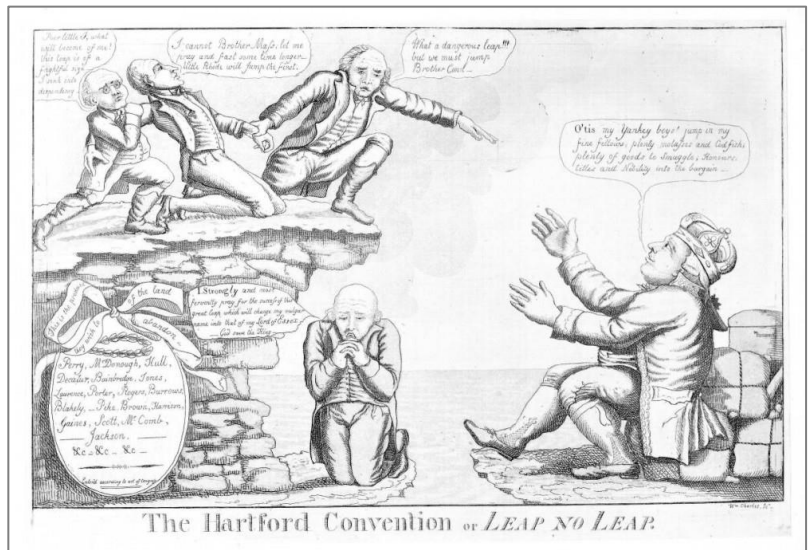


Contemplating the possibility of secession over the War of 1812 (fueled in large part by the economic interests of New England merchants), the Hartford Convention posed the possibility of disaster for the still-young United States. England, represented by the figure John Bull on the right side, is shown in this political cartoon with arms open to accept New England back into its empire. William Charles Jr., The Hartford Convention or Leap No Leap. Wikimedia.

In 1814, Americans gained naval victories on Lake Champlain near Plattsburgh, preventing a British land invasion of the United States and on the Chesapeake Bay at Fort Mchenry in Baltimore. Fort Mchenry repelled the nineteen-ship British fleet, enduring twenty-seven hours of bombardment virtually unscathed. Watching from aboard a British ship, American poet Francis Scott Key penned the verses of what would become the national anthem, "The Star Spangled Banner."

Impressive though these accomplishments were, they belied what was actually a poorly executed military campaign against the British. The U.S. Navy won their most significant victories in the Atlantic Ocean in 1813. Napoleon's defeat in early 1814, however, allowed the British to focus on North America and blockade American ports. Thanks to the blockade, the British were able to burn Washington, D.C., on August 24, 1814 and open a new theater of operations in the South. The British sailed for New Orleans, where they achieved a naval victory at Lake Borgne before losing the land invasion to Major General Andrew Jackson's troops in January 1815. This American victory actually came after the United States and the United Kingdom signed the Treaty of Ghent on December 24, 1814, but the Battle of New Orleans proved to be a psychological victory that boosted American morale and affected how the war has been remembered.

But not all Americans supported the war. In 1814, New England Federalists met in Hartford, Connecticut, to try to end the war and curb the power of the Republican Party. They produced a document that proposed abolishing the three-fifths rule that afforded southern slaveholders disproportionate representation in Congress, limiting the president to a single term in office, and most importantly, demanding a two-thirds congressional majority, rather than a simple majority, for legislation that declared war, admitted new states into the Union, or regulated commerce. With the two-thirds majority, New England's Federalist politicians believed they could limit the power of their political foes.



The artist shows Washington D.C. engulfed in flames as the British troops set fire to the city in 1813. "Capture of the City of Washington," August 1814. Wikimedia.

These proposals were sent to Washington, but unfortunately for the Federalists, the victory at New Orleans buoyed popular support for the Madison administration. With little evidence, newspapers accused the Hartford Convention's delegates of plotting secession. The episode

This activity has been adapted from: <http://www.americanyawp.com/text/07-the-early-republic/>

demonstrated the waning power of Federalism and the need for the region's politicians to shed their aristocratic and Anglophile image. The next New England politician to assume the presidency, John Quincy Adams, would, in 1824, emerge not from within the Federalist fold but having served as secretary of state under President James Monroe, the leader of the Virginia Republicans.

The Treaty of Ghent essentially returned relations between the United States and Britain to their prewar status. The war, however, mattered politically and strengthened American nationalism. During the war, Americans read patriotic newspaper stories, sang patriotic songs, and bought consumer goods decorated with national emblems. They also heard stories about how the British and their Native allies threatened to bring violence into American homes. For examples, rumors spread that British officers promised rewards of "beauty and booty" for their soldiers when they attacked New Orleans. In the Great Lakes borderlands, wartime propaganda fueled Americans' fear of Britain's Native American allies, whom they believed would slaughter men, women, and children indiscriminately. Terror and love worked together to make American citizens feel a stronger bond with their country. Because the war mostly cut off America's trade with Europe, it also encouraged Americans to see themselves as different and separate; it fostered a sense that the country had been reborn.

Former treasury secretary Albert Gallatin claimed that the War of 1812 revived "national feelings" that had dwindled after the Revolution. "The people," he wrote, were now "more American; they feel and act more like a nation." Politicians proposed measures to reinforce the fragile Union through capitalism and built on these sentiments of nationalism. The United States continued to expand into Indian territories with westward settlement in far-flung new states like Tennessee, Ohio, Mississippi, and Illinois. Between 1810 and 1830, the country added more than six thousand new post offices.

In 1817, South Carolina congressman John C. Calhoun called for building projects to "bind the republic together with a perfect system of roads and canals." He joined with other politicians, such as Kentucky's powerful Henry Clay, to promote what came to be called an American System. They aimed to make America economically independent and encouraged commerce between the states over trade with Europe and the West Indies. The American System would include a new Bank of the United States to provide capital; a high protective tariff, which would raise the prices of imported goods and help American-made products compete; and a network of "internal improvements," roads and canals to let people take American goods to market.

These projects were controversial. Many people believed that they were unconstitutional or would increase the federal government's power at the expense of the states. Even Calhoun later changed his mind and joined the opposition. The War of 1812, however, had reinforced Americans' sense of the nation's importance in their political and economic life. Even when the federal government did not act, states created banks, roads, and canals of their own.

What may have been the boldest declaration of America's postwar pride came in 1823. President James Monroe issued an ultimatum to the empires of Europe in order to support several wars of independence in Latin America. The Monroe Doctrine declared that the United States considered its entire hemisphere, both North and South America, off-limits to new European colonization. Although Monroe was a Jeffersonian, some of his principles echoed Federalist policies. Whereas Jefferson cut the size of the military and ended all internal taxes in his first term, Monroe advocated the need for a strong military and an aggressive foreign policy. Since Americans were spreading out over the continent, Monroe authorized the federal government to invest in canals and roads, which he said would "shorten distances and, by making each part more accessible to and dependent on the other . . . shall bind the Union more closely together." As Federalists had attempted two decades earlier, Republican leaders after the War of 1812 advocated strengthening the government to strengthen the nation.

## QUESTIONS TO ANSWER FROM THE READING

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1. Give as least THREE major contributing causes of the War of 1812. How did each of them play into the steps towards war?
2. Describe IN YOUR OWN WORDS the three stages or theaters of the war.
3. What battle inspired the lyrics for the "Star Spangled Banner"? Who wrote it?
4. What was the primary purpose of the Hartford Convention? What effect did it have on the Federalist Party?
5. Give at least THREE primary consequence of the War of 1812.