Regarding the Chesapeake affair, the Washington Federalist reported.

“We have never, on any occasion, witnessed the spirit of the people excited to so great a degree of indignation, or such a thirst for revenge, as on hearing of the late unexampled outrage on the Chesapeake. All parties, ranks, and professions were unanimous in their detestation of the dastardly deed, and all cried aloud for vengeance.”

Britain’s determination was spectacularly highlighted in 1807. A royal frigate overhauled a U.S. frigate, the Chesapeake, about ten miles off the coast of Virginia. The British captain bluntly demanded the surrender of four alleged deserters. London had never claimed the right to seize sailors from a foreign warship, and the American commander, though totally unprepared to fight, refused the request. The British warship thereupon fired three devastating broadsides at close range, killing three Americans and wounding eighteen. Four deserters were dragged away, and the bloody hulk called the Chesapeake limped back to port.

Britain was clearly in the wrong, as the London Foreign Office admitted. But London’s contrition availed little; a roar of national wrath went up from infuriated Americans. Jefferson, the peace lover, could easily have had war if he had wanted it.

Jefferson’s Backfiring Embargo

National honor would not permit a slavish submission to British and French mistreatment. Yet a large-scale foreign war was contrary to the settled policy of the new Republic—and in addition it would be futile. The navy was weak, thanks largely to Jefferson’s anti-navalism; and the army was even weaker. A disastrous defeat would not improve America’s plight.

The warring nations in Europe depended heavily upon the United States for raw materials and foodstuffs. In his eager search for an alternative to war, Jefferson seized upon this essential fact. He reasoned that if America voluntarily cut off its exports, the offending powers would be forced to bow, hat in hand, and agree to respect its rights.

Responding to the presidential lash, Congress hastily passed the Embargo Act late in 1807. This rigorous law forbade the export of all goods from the United States, whether in American or in foreign ships. It was a compromise between submission and shooting. Federalist New England could well have prayed for relief from its newly found Virginia friend, “Mad Tom” Jefferson. Forests of dead masts gradually filled once-bustling harbors; docks that had once rumbled were deserted (except for illegal trade); and soup kitchens cared for some of the hungry unemployed. Jeffersonian Republicans probably hurt the commerce of New England, which they avowedly were trying to protect, far more than Old England and France together were doing. Farmers of the South and West, the strongholds of Jefferson, suffered no less disastrously than New England. They were alarmed by the mounting piles of unexportable cotton, grain, and tobacco. Jefferson seemed to be waging war on his fellow citizens, rather than on the offending foreign powers.

An enormous illicit trade mushroomed in 1808, especially along the Canadian border, where bands of armed Americans on loaded rafts overawed or overpowered federal agents. Irate citizens cynically transposed the letters of “Embargo” to read “O Grab Me,” “Go Bar ’Em,” and “Mobrage,” while heartily cursing the “Dambargo.”

Jefferson nonetheless induced Congress to pass iron-toothed enforcing legislation. It was so inquisitorial and tyrannical as to cause some Americans to think more kindly of George III, whom Jefferson had berated in the Declaration of Independence. One indignant New Hampshireite denounced the president with this ditty:

Our ships all in motion,
Once whiten’d the ocean;
They sail’d and returned with a Cargo;
Now doom’d to decay
They are fallen a prey,
To Jefferson, worms, and EMBARGO.

New England seethed with talk of secession; and Jefferson later admitted that he felt the foundations of government tremble under his feet.

An alarmed Congress, yielding to the storm of public anger, finally repealed the embargo, on March 1, 1809, three days before Jefferson’s retirement. A half-loaf substitute was provided by the Non-Intercourse Act. This measure formally reopened
trade with all the nations of the world, except the two most important, England and France. Though thus watered down, economic coercion continued to be the policy of the Jeffersonians from 1809 to 1812, when the nation finally plunged into war.

Why did the embargo, Jefferson's most daring act of statesmanship, collapse after fifteen dismal months? First of all, he underestimated the bulldog determination of the British, as others have, and overestimated their dependence on America's trade. Bumper grain crops blessed the British Isles during these years, and the revolutionary Latin American republics unexpectedly threw open their ports for compensating commerce.

The hated embargo was not continued long enough or tightly enough to achieve the desired results. But leaders must know the temper of their people, and Jefferson should have foreseen that such a self-crucifying weapon could not possibly command public support.

A crestfallen Jefferson himself admitted that the embargo was three times more costly than war. The irony is that with only a fraction of its cost to the country, he could have built a fairly strong navy. Such a fighting force would have won more respect for American rights on the high seas and might well have prevented the War of 1812.

A stoppage of exports hurt Federalist shipping but temporarily revived the Federalist party. Gain-

Launching of the Ship Fame, by George Ropes, Jr., 1802  Jefferson's embargo throttled thriving New England shipyards like this one, stirring bitter resentment.
A Federalist circular in Massachusetts against the embargo cried out.

"Let every man who holds the name of America dear to him, stretch forth his hands and put this accursed thing, this Embargo from him. Be resolute, act like sons of liberty, of God, and your country: nerve your arm with vengeance against the Despot [Jefferson] who would wrest the inestimable germ of your independence from you—and you shall be Conquerors!!!"

America's industrial might were laid behind the protective wall of the embargo, followed by nonintercourse and the War of 1812. Jefferson, the avowed critic of factories, may have unwittingly done more for American manufacturing than Alexander Hamilton, industry's outspoken friend.

Jefferson's embargo, followed in mitigated form by nonintercourse, undeniably pinched England. Many British importers and manufacturers suffered severe losses, especially those dependent on American cotton. As thousands of factory workers were thrown out of jobs, agitation mounted for a repeal of the restrictions that had brought on the embargo. A petition to Parliament in 1812, from the city of Birmingham alone, bore twenty thousand names on a sheet of parchment 150 feet long. So strong was public pressure that two days before Congress declared war in June 1812, the British foreign secretary announced that the offensive Orders in Council would be immediately suspended. The supreme irony is that Jefferson's policy of economic coercion did prevail in the end, but America was not patient enough to reap the reward of its sacrifices.

Jefferson's Legacy

Thomas Jefferson retained much of his popularity, even though it was severely tarnished by the embargo. But because he feared setting a precedent for dictatorship, he spurned suggestions that he might run for a third term. Jefferson, rather than Washington, who had no serious constitutional qualms about continuing in office, was the true father of the two-term presidential tradition. After leaving the presidency at the age of sixty-five, Jefferson lived eighteen more years, glad to have escaped what he called the "splendid misery" of the presidential penitentiary. He strongly favored the nomination and election of a kindred spirit as his successor, his friend and fellow Virginian, the quiet, intellectual, and unassuming James Madison.

Thomas Jefferson and John Adams died on the same day—appropriately the Fourth of July, 1826. The last words of Adams, then ninety-one, were, "Thomas Jefferson still survives." He was wrong, for three hours earlier Jefferson had breathed his last breath. But Thomas Jefferson still survives in the democratic ideals and liberal principles of the great nation that he risked his all to found and that he served so long and faithfully.

Madison: Dupe of Napoleon

Scholarly James Madison took the presidential oath on March 4, 1809, as the awesome conflict in Europe was roaring to its climax. Madison was small of stature (5 feet, 4 inches; 1.62 meters), light of weight (about 100 pounds; 45 kilograms), bald of head, and weak of voice. Despite a distinguished career as a legislator, as president he fell tragically short of providing vigorous executive leadership. Crippled also by factions within his cabinet, he was unable to dominate his party, as Jefferson had once done.

Early in 1805 Jefferson privately foresaw the two-term Twenty-Second Amendment (1951).

"General Washington set the example of voluntary retirement after eight years. I shall follow it, and a few more precedents will oppose the obstacle of habit to anyone after a while who shall endeavor to extend his term. Perhaps it may beget a disposition to establish it by an amendment of the Constitution."
The Non-Intercourse Act of 1809—the limited substitute for the embargo aimed solely at Britain and France—would expire in about a year. Congress, desperately attempting to uphold American rights, adopted in 1810 a bargaining measure known as Macon’s Bill No. 2. While permitting American trade with all the world, it dangled an attractive lure. If either England or France repealed its commercial restrictions, America would restore nonimportation against the nonrepealing nation. In short, the United States would bribe the belligerents into respecting its rights.

This opportunity was made to order for Napoleon, the master of deceit. He was eager to resume nonimportation against the British because it would serve as a partial blockade, which he would not have to raise a finger to enforce. Accordingly, he blandly announced, in August 1810, that his objectionable decrees had been repealed. Napoleon, prince of liars, had no intention whatever of repealing his damaging decrees. But Madison, frantically seeking to wrest a recognition of American rights from England, accepted French bad faith as good faith. He formally announced, in November 1810, that France had complied with the terms of Macon’s Bill No. 2 and that nonimportation would consequently be reestablished against Britain.

His decision was fateful. Once Madison had aligned his nation against England commercially, he found himself gravitating toward France politically—and edging toward the whirlpool of war. Events at sea as well as events on land soon tipped him into the maelstrom.

### War Whoops Arouse the War Hawks

The complexion of the Twelfth Congress, which met late in 1811, differed markedly from that of its predecessor. Recent elections had swept away many of the older “submission men” and replaced them with young hotheads, chiefly from the South and West. The youthful newcomers—“the boys,” Virginia congressman John Randolph sneeringly called them—were on fire for a new war with the old enemy. Not having had a conflict in their own generation, these war hawks were weary of hearing how their fathers had “whipped” the British single-handedly. They won control of the House of Representatives and elevated to the speakership the tall (6 feet, 2 inches; 1.88 meters), eloquent, and magnetic Henry Clay of Kentucky, the gallant “Harry of the West,” then only thirty-four years old.

The war hawks wanted “Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights,” as well as free land. It may seem strange
in believing that only a vigorous assertion of American rights could demonstrate the viability of American nationhood—and of democracy as a form of government. If America could not fight to protect itself, its experiment in republicanism would be discredited in the eyes of a scoffing world.

Western war hawks were especially eager to wipe out a dangerously renewed Indian threat to the pioneer settlers who were streaming steadily into the trans-Allegheny wilderness. As this white flood washed through the green forests, more and more Indians were pushed farther and farther toward the setting sun. Indian leaders particularly worried about white encroachment on the area known as Kentucky. Generations of Native Americans had observed a taboo against settling in the Kentucky region or even hunting extensively in it. Kentucky formed a buffer between the northern and southern tribes and served as a hunting reserve used only in times of scarcity. Now the Indians watched with mounting anxiety from the banks of the Ohio River as flatboat after flatboat of white settlers floated downstream, bound for Kentucky.

Two remarkable Shawnee brothers, Tecumseh and the Prophet, concluded that if this onrush tide were ever to be stopped, that time had come. They began to weld together a far-flung confederacy of all the tribes east of the Mississippi. Theirs was a last, desperate attempt to realize the dream of a large-scale pan-Indian alliance against the whites that had repeatedly eluded their ancestors. They inspired a vibrant movement of Indian unity and cultural revitalization. They urged their followers to give up textile clothing in exchange for traditional buckskin garments. Their warriors foreswore firewater in order to be fit for the last-ditch battle with the “paleface” intruders. Tecumseh argued eloquently that Indians should not recognize whites’ concept of “ownership” of the land. Rather, he urged, no Indian should cede control of land to whites unless all Indians agreed.

White frontierspeople and their war-hawk spokesmen in Congress were convinced that British “sculp buyers” in Canada were nourishing the Indians’ growing strength. Seizing the initiative, American general William Henry Harrison advanced upon Tecumseh’s headquarters at Tippecanoe in present-day Indiana on November 7, 1811. He forced the Indians from the village and burned it to the ground. Fighting alongside the British, Tecumseh was killed in 1813, at the Battle of the Thames. With him perished the dream of an Indian confederacy.

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In a speech at Vincennes, Indiana Territory, Tecumseh (1768?–1813) said,

“Sell a country! Why not sell the air, the clouds, and the great sea, as well as the earth? Did not the Great Spirit make them all for the use of his children?”
In the South, Andrew Jackson inflicted a similar, crushing defeat on the Creek Indians at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend (in present-day Alabama) on March 27, 1814. These victories effectively quashed Indian resistance to white expansion east of the Mississippi. The way now lay open for a surge of settlement into the Ohio country and the southwestern frontier.

Harrison's onslaught at Tippecanoe had broken the back of the Indian rebellion. It also made the blood course faster in the veins of the impetuous war hawks. People like Representative Felix Grundy of Tennessee, three of whose brothers had been killed in clashes with Indians, cried that there was only one way to remove the menace of the Indians: wipe out their Canadian base. Canada was a lush prize—so near, so desirable, and apparently so defenseless. "On to Canada, on to Canada" was the war hawks' ominous chant. Southern expansionists, less vocal, cast a covetous eye on Florida, then weakly held by Britain's ally Spain.

Militant war hawks, with scattered but essential support from other sections, finally engineered a declaration of war in June 1812. The vote in the House was 79 to 49, in the Senate 19 to 13 (see table below). The close tally revealed a dangerous degree of national disunity. Representatives from the pro-British maritime and commercial centers, as well as from the middle Atlantic states, almost solidly opposed hostilities. Ironically, the West and South-west, mostly landlocked, foisted upon the sea-facing East a war for a free sea that the East vehemently resented.

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**War Vote in House of Representatives, 1812, Showing Western and Southwestern War Sentiment**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States</th>
<th>Regions</th>
<th>For War</th>
<th>Against War</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N.H.</td>
<td>Frontier New England</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vt.</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass.</td>
<td>Maritime and Federalist New England; Mass</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(includes frontier Maine)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conn.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.Y.</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.J.</td>
<td>Commercial and Federalist middle states</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Del.</td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pa.</td>
<td>Jeffersonian middle states</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Md.</td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Va.</td>
<td></td>
<td>14</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N.C.</td>
<td>Jeffersonian southern states</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.C.</td>
<td></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ga.</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ohio</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ky.</td>
<td>The trans-Allegheny West—nest of war hawks</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenn.</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>79</strong></td>
<td><strong>49</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
"Mr. Madison's War"

But why fight Britain rather than France, which had committed nearly as many maritime offenses? The traditional Republican attachment to France partly explains the choice of foe, as does the visibility of British impressments and the British arming of the Indians, who were smashing into pioneer cabins on the frontier.

The tempting prize of Canada also beckoned from the north. Americans fondly (but wrongly) believed that taking Canada would be absurdly simple, a "frontiersman's frolic." If this northern mirage had not been so inviting, the administration might well have waited a few more months and thereby learned of London's repeal of the Orders in Council, announced two days before Congress voted for war. Had there been an Atlantic cable, the war hawks probably could not have forced a declaration of hostilities through the Senate.

Seafaring New England damned the war for a free sea. The news of the declaration of war was greeted with muffled bells, flags at half-mast, and public fasting. Why the opposition? To New Englanders, impressment was an old and exaggerated wrong. New England shippers and manufacturers were still raking in money, and profits dull patriotism. Pro-British Federalists in the Northeast also sympathized with England and resented the Virginia dynasty's sympathy with Napoleon, whom they regarded as the "Corsican butcher" and the "anti-Christ of the age."

Federalists also condemned the War of 1812 because they opposed the acquisition of Canada, which would merely add more agrarian states from the wild Northwest. This, in turn, would increase the voting strength of the Jeffersonian Republicans. New England Federalists were determined, wrote one versifier,

To rule the nation if they could,
But see it damned if others should.

The bitterness of rule-or-ruin New Englanders against "Mr. Madison's War" led them to treason or near-treason. In a sense America had to fight two enemies simultaneously: Old England and New England. New England gold holders probably lent more dollars to the British exchequer than to the federal treasury. New England farmers sent huge quantities of supplies and foodstuffs to Canada, enabling British armies to invade New York. New England governors stubbornly refused to permit their militia to serve outside their own states.

Thus perilously divided, the barely United States, plunged into armed conflict against Britain, then the world's most powerful empire. No sober American could have much reasonable hope of victory.

The Present State of Our Country
Partisan disunity over the War of 1812 threatens the nation's very existence. The prowar Jeffersonian at the left is attacking the pillar of federalism; the antiwar Federalist at the right is trying to pull down democracy. The spirit of Washington warns that the country's welfare depends upon all three pillars, including republicanism.
Chronology

- 1800  Jefferson defeats Adams for presidency
- 1801  Judiciary Act of 1801
- 1801-1805  Naval war with Tripoli
- 1802  Revised naturalization law
  Judiciary Act of 1801 repealed
- 1803  Marbury v. Madison
  Louisiana Purchase
- 1804  Jefferson reelected president
  Impeachment of Justice Chase
- 1804-1806  Lewis and Clark expedition
- 1805  Peace treaty with Tripoli
- 1805-1807  Pike's explorations
- 1806  Burr treason trial
- 1807  Chesapeake affair
  Embargo Act
- 1808  Madison elected president
- 1809  Non-Intercourse Act replaces Embargo Act
- 1810  Macon's Bill No. 2
  Napoleon announces (falsely) repeal of blockade decrees
  Madison reestablishes nonimportation against Britain
- 1811  Battle of Tippecanoe
- 1812  United States declares war on Britain
- 1813  Battle of the Thames
- 1814  Battle of Horseshoe Bend

SUGGESTED READINGS

Primary Source Documents


An asterisk indicates that the document, or an excerpt from it, can be found in Thomas A. Bailey and David M. Kennedy, eds., The American Spirit: United States History as Seen by Contemporaries, 9th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

Secondary Sources