

# War of 1812



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Several forces led Americans to declare war on Britain in 1812. France and Britain, Europe's two most powerful nations, had battled almost continuously since the late 1700s. Hostilities began during the French Revolution, and then continued as Britain led the efforts to stop French expansion under Napoleon I. In 1803, the continuing tension in Europe escalated into a full-scale conflict, the Napoleonic Wars. As fighting between the British and French increased, each side took steps to prevent the United States from trading with the other. The great causes of complaint against Great Britain, your committee need only say, that the United States, as a sovereign and independent Power, claim the right to use the ocean, which is the common and acknowledged highway of nations, for the purposes of transporting, in their own vessels, the products of their own soil and the acquisitions of their own industry.... " (Document 1). European warfare directly affected American trade and the economy.

American presidents from Jefferson to Madison tried to keep the United States impartial during these conflicts, but both France and Britain completely disregarded the rights of neutral countries. Another conflict occurred in North America itself, which was clashing with a native population committed to protecting its lands from intruders. In both the North and South, the threatened tribes united to resist white infringement. They began as well to build connections with British forces in Canada and Spanish forces in Florida.

Therefore, the Indian conflict on land became intertwined with the European conflict on the seas, and ultimately helped cause the War of 1812. In 1805, at the Battle of Trafalgar, the British virtually destroyed the French navy.

Since France was no longer a threat to the British at sea, Napoleon designed what he called the Continental System, which closed the European continent to British trading. Napoleon also issued decrees banning British ships and neutral ships at British ports from leaving their cargoes at any European port controlled by France or its allies.

The British government responded by establishing a blockade of the European coast. The blockade required that any goods being shipped to Napoleon's Europe be carried either in British vessels or in neutral vessels stopping at British ports. In the early 19th century, the United States had developed one of the most important merchant marines in the world, which controlled a large proportion of the trade between Europe and the West Indies. However, the conflicts in Europe threatened that control, because American ships were caught between Napoleon's decrees and Britain's blockade.

Both of the belligerent powers were violating America's rights as a neutral nation. Yet most Americans considered the British, with their greater sea power, the worst offender, since the British vessels frequently stopped American ships on the high seas and seized sailors off the decks, making them victims of "impressment." The British navy received low pay, had terrible ship conditions, and few volunteered. As a result, most had to be "impressed" into the service. Many deserted and emigrated to the United States to join the American merchant marine or the American navy.

To justify this loss of men, the British claimed the right to stop and search American merchantmen and reimpress deserters. Public outrage over

impressment grew increasingly after the incident between the American naval frigate Chesapeake and a British vessel, the Leopard. In June 1807 the Leopard approached the Chesapeake and demanded to search the ship for British deserters. The Chesapeake's commander, James Barron, refused, and the Leopard opened fire. Numerous American sailors were killed or wounded during the attack, and the Chesapeake surrendered.

When news of the Chesapeake-Leopard incident reached the United States, there was a great cry for revenge. But Jefferson and Madison tried to maintain peace. Jefferson ordered British warships to leave American waters and demanded an end to impressment. The British did make some apologies and restitution for the Chesapeake-Leopard incident, but continued to claim the right to seize American ships and inspect them for deserters. To avoid war and maintain neutrality, Jefferson persuaded Congress to pass the Embargo Act of 1807.

It prohibited American ships from leaving the United States for any foreign port anywhere in the world, a policy that banned trade with Europe. British and French aggression hurt New England more than any other section of the country, but its merchants did not want to go to war with the British. Twenty out of thirty-two New England representatives voted against war with England in 1812 (Document 5). Britain was the region's most important trading partner, and the profits were extremely important. The Embargo was a growing political problem, and Jefferson decided to back down.

A few days before leaving office, he approved a bill ending the embargo with what he called "peaceable coercion." Consequently, Congress replaced it in

1809 with the Non-Intercourse Act, which forbade trade only with France and Britain. This measure was also overturned in 1810 by Macon's Bill No. 2, which reopened American commerce with all nations, but authorized the President to prohibit commerce with either belligerent if it should continue violating neutral shipping. In an effort to force the United States to reimpose the Embargo against Britain, Napoleon announced that France would no longer interfere with American shipping.

Madison announced that an embargo against Great Britain alone would automatically go into effect early in 1811 unless Britain renounced its restrictions on American shipping. This new embargo persuaded England to repeal its blockade of Europe. Nonetheless, the repeal came too late to prevent war. As stated by Congressman John Calhoun, " The question... is reduced to this single point-which shall we do, abandon or defend our own commercial and maritime rights, and the personal liberties of our citizens employed in exercising them? These rights are essentially attacked, and more is the only means of redress....

I know of one principle to make a nation great... and that is to protect every citizen in the lawful pursuit of his business.... Protection and patriotism are reciprocal... if [the British] persist in such daring insult and injury to [the United States], it will be bound in honor and interest to resist. " (Document 2). Did the United States actually have a choice other than to resort to war? Western and southern representatives in Congress, most notably Henry Clay of Kentucky and John Caldwell Calhoun of South Carolina, led a pro-war faction that became known as the War Hawks.

They argued that British officers from Canada were encouraging Native American peoples to rebel against the United States. For many years, frontiersmen had fought interior tribes with little help from the federal government. The War Hawks now felt they could enlist federal aid against Native Americans and their British allies by supporting a war to stop British interference with American trade on the seas. In addition, the War Hawks wanted to acquire more land. The United States could seize the territories of Canada and Florida in a war with Great Britain.

Thus, representatives from the South and the Western Frontier voted strongly in favor of war with Great Britain (Document 5). Since the American Revolution, the United States had been provoked by the failure of the British to withdraw from American territory along the Great Lakes. Their backing of the Indians on America's frontiers and their unwillingness to sign commercial agreements favorable to the United States also upset Americans. Ever since the Revolution most Indians had continued to look to England for protection.

The British in Canada, for their part, had relied on the Indians as partners in the lucrative fur trade. The 1807 war crisis following the Chesapeake-Leopard incident revived the conflict between Indians and white settlers. This conflict involved William Henry Harrison and Tecumseh. Harrison was an advocate of development in the western lands. Jefferson offered the Indians a choice: they could convert themselves into settled farmers and become a part of white society, or they could migrate west of the Mississippi. In either case, they would have to give up their claims to their tribal lands in the Northwest.

The separate tribes were helpless by themselves against the power of the United States so the British authorities in Canada were willing to help. This further enraged Americans and led to war. There were several circumstances and events, which led to the War of 1812. Britain continually violated America's rights as a neutral nation. It created a blockade. It also established a policy of impressments. In addition, the British incited the Indians to attack Americans for western territory. The United States continually tried to remain neutral.

However, according to Hugh Nelson of Virginia, "... to demonstrate to the world... that the people of these states were united, one and indivisible... to show that our republican government was competent to assert its rights, to maintain the interests of the people, and to repel all foreign aggression... My conduct as your representative has been regulated entirely by these great and important considerations. " (Document 7). This clearly shows that war was inevitable. It was important that for once we as a country came together and asserted ourselves as a unified nation.