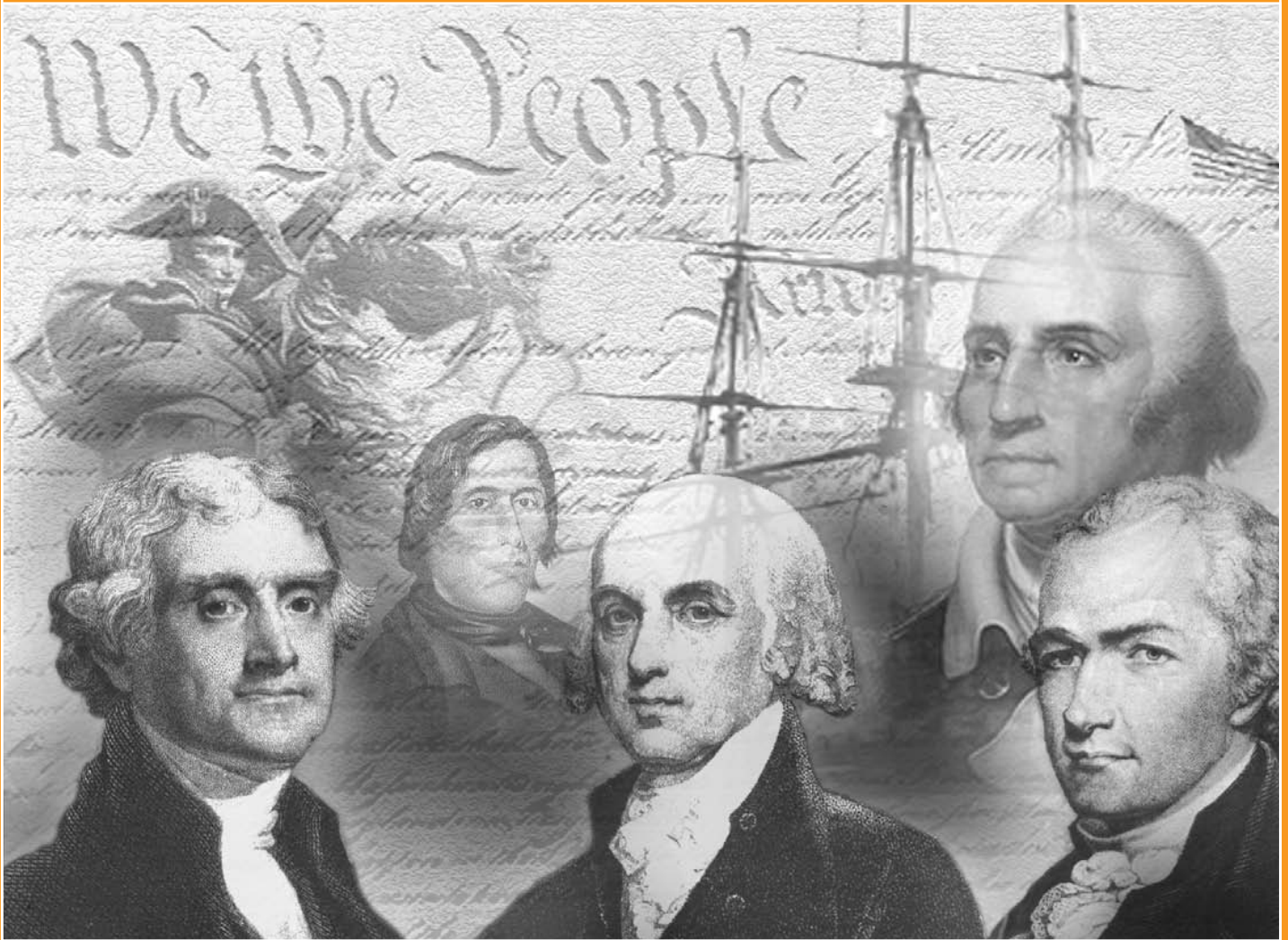


Challenge to the New Republic: The War of 1812



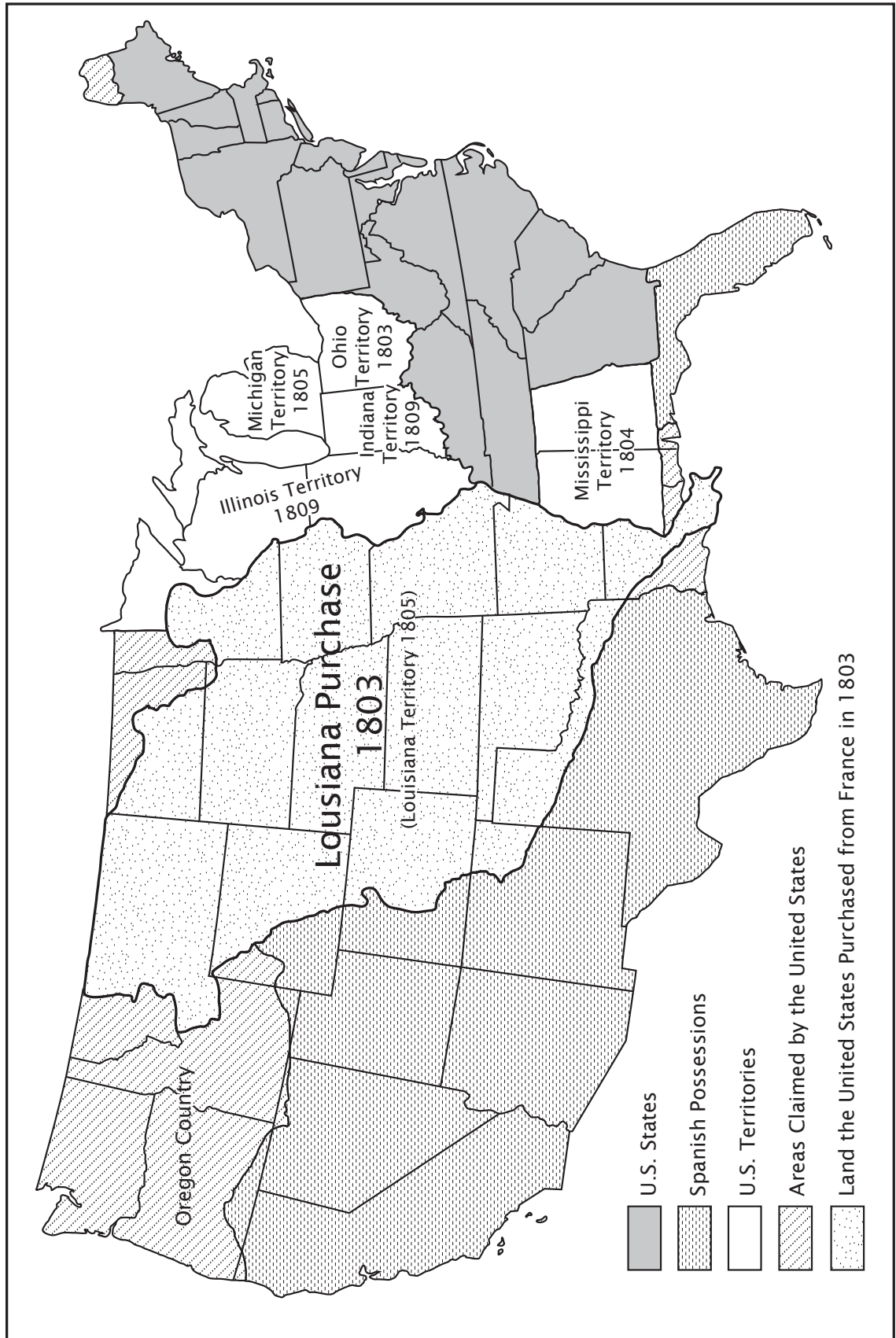
THE CHOICES PROGRAM

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History and Current Issues for the Classroom

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The United States in 1810



Introduction: A New Nation

From the vantage point of today, it is easy to overlook the difficulties faced in the early years of the U.S. republic. In 1787, the founders of the United States realized that the creation of a successful constitutional republic would be closely connected with foreign policy issues. But they would find it very difficult to negotiate a safe and prosperous course among more powerful European countries while trying to maintain the recently-won independence. Conflicting visions among leaders of the federal government, particularly about the role of the Constitution in foreign policy, made the task more difficult.

What three main foreign policy difficulties did the early republic face?

There were three main foreign policy issues the leaders faced. First, people in the United States would have to balance their relationships with Britain and France—Europe’s constantly warring duo. Americans had found themselves embroiled in the conflict between Britain and France before. During the French and Indian War they had fought with the British against the French. Then during the Revolutionary War, they had enjoyed assistance from France in their struggle for independence from Britain.

As George Washington took office in 1789, he and his administration set out to steer a neutral course among the warring nations and shifting alliances of Europe. Aware of the comparative military weakness of the United States, the Washington administration felt it had to keep the young republic free of any military entanglements with Britain and France. This was a policy that made good economic sense as well. The founders wanted the economy of the United States to benefit from “neutral” trade, or trade that did not favor any nation over another or cause the United States to have to support any warring nation.

Second, the United States wanted to take advantage of the vast territories and potential wealth on its frontiers. This would not be easy.

In 1787, Britain had forts in the Northwest, and Spain held the Louisiana Territory and Florida. In addition, the Native Americans who lived on these frontiers did not like the U.S. government’s expansionist ideas.

Finally, the struggle to create a foreign policy mirrored the struggle to define what the United States would be like domestically. One school of thought—reflected in the vision of Thomas Jefferson—saw the nation as a land of small farmers. Jefferson had an affinity for France and its efforts to end its monarchy, while to him Great Britain was the epitome of tyranny. Jefferson also hoped that France would become the prime market for the agricultural goods of the U.S. South. A second school of thought—represented in particular by Alexander Hamilton—imagined a United States that would prosper through manufacturing and the help of a strong, central government. Hamilton believed that Britain’s trade and wealth would contribute to the growth of an industrial economy in the United States.

Between 1793 and 1815, the European continent was engulfed in a series of wars pitting the French against the British. The United States, dependent on trade for economic survival, found it could not please one without angering the other. Indeed, during this time Great Britain and France frequently seized U.S. ships. By 1812, many U.S. leaders felt all their efforts to retain independence and secure safe trade had been exhausted, but they were not in agreement about what to do next.

In the coming days, you will follow the path of U.S. decision makers during the first years of the republic. You will be asked to view the world from their perspectives. With your classmates, you will analyze the situation and explore the policy choices they considered. Finally, you will take on the role of early Congressional leaders and be asked to recommend, just as they did at the time, what the United States should do in 1812.

Part II: The Failure of Peaceable Coercion

The election of 1800 was both hotly contested and constitutionally problematic. Both Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr received seventy-three electoral votes from their Democratic-Republican supporters. John Adams received sixty-five. But Burr didn't accept the fact that the intent was for him to be vice-president, so the question of who would be elected president needed to be resolved by the House of Representatives. After thirty-five separate votes in the House, Jefferson was elected by a very slim margin. (Soon after, Congress drafted the Twelfth Amendment which provided that electors cast separate ballots for president and for vice-president.)

The Jefferson Administration (1801-1809)

Jefferson's outlook on relations between nations and his distrust of strong central government differed strongly from previous administrations. He believed that trade and the "law of nations," not military power, should govern relations between countries. In spite of increasingly sharp differences between the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans, Jefferson used his inaugural address to offer an olive branch. He hoped to heal the divisions between the two parties by saying that differences of opinion should be tolerated. Nevertheless, as the nation's first Democratic-Republican president, he led the dismantling

of the Federalists' domestic program. Jefferson's government reduced the army and navy, abolished the whiskey tax, reduced the national debt, and repealed legislation that would have allowed Adams' last-minute judicial appointees to take their seats as judges.

***"The Federalists
are down at last!
The Monarchists
completely cast!
The Aristocrats are
stripped of power
—Storms o'er the
British faction lower.
Soon we Republicans
shall see Columbia's
sons from bondage
free. Lord! how the
Federalists will stare
At JEFFERSON in
ADAMS' chair."***

—Song in celebration of
Adams' defeat



This Federalist cartoon, "The Providential Detection," portrays Jefferson as overly sympathetic to France.

What was the major foreign policy achievement of Jefferson's first administration?

With the giants of Europe at peace from 1801 to late 1803, U.S. commerce flourished, and French interest in North America increased. Napoleon had reacquired the Louisiana Territory from Spain in 1800 in order to use the region to supply his colonies in the Caribbean. The United States reacted with concern. France was powerful—Spain was not. Navigation of the Mississippi and access to the port of New Orleans were critical to U.S. commerce.

The United States sent James Monroe to France to offer to buy New Orleans and part of Florida from Napoleon. Before Monroe arrived, Napoleon lost his taste for empire in the new world. The successful rebellion of enslaved people in Haiti, led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, made Napoleon believe that the cost wasn't worth the gain. Expecting renewed war with Great Britain, Napoleon offered the Louisiana Territory for \$15 million. Without time to wait for instructions from Jefferson, Monroe accepted the offer. It was a major accomplishment.

With this purchase, the United States nearly doubled its size (see map on page ii). Jefferson believed that he had expanded the "Empire of Liberty" and secured U.S. use of the Mississippi River and the port of New Orleans for U.S. farmers in the Ohio River Valley.

Jefferson's decision was not popular with everyone. The Federalists feared that the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory and its eventual settlement would doom the Federalist Party to a subordinate role, as western farmers cast their votes for Democratic-Republican candidates. The purchase also raised questions in Congress about the status of slavery: would the new areas become slave or free states? Congress also discussed the merits of slavery on the whole but did not immediately solve the problem.

Once again the Constitution had not offered guidance on how to proceed with a foreign policy issue; it was silent on how

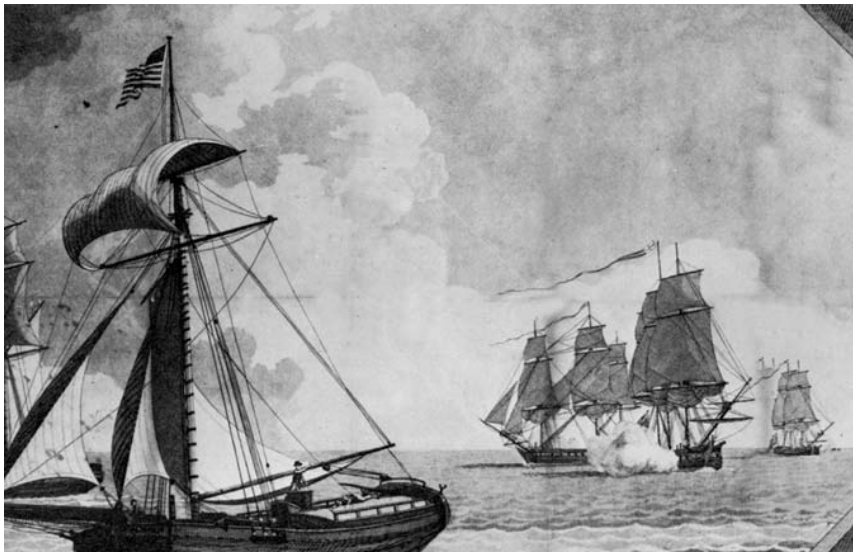


Toussaint L'Ouverture.

new territory could be added to the United States. The Federalists viewed Jefferson's action as hypocritical. They found it ironic that a staunch defender of a strict interpretation of the Constitution now offered a loose interpretation regarding the acquisition of new territory.

How did deteriorating relations between Great Britain and France affect the United States?

During Jefferson's second administration, relations with both Great Britain and France took a turn for the worse. The sea power of Great Britain posed a major obstacle to Napoleon's vision of a vast French empire. In the Berlin Decree in 1806, Napoleon ordered the nations of Europe to stop buying British goods. Great Britain responded by decreeing that all ships carrying trade for the continent had to stop in Britain first where they would be searched for war materials. This decree was known as the Orders in Council. France countered by saying that all ships that stopped in Britain were liable to seizure.



Library of Congress.

The British vessel *Leander* fires a U.S. ship prior to impressing some of its sailors.

U.S. shippers were caught between a rock and a hard place. If they proceeded directly to France, their ships were liable to seizure by Britain. If they proceeded first to Great Britain they were subject to seizure by the French.

In addition to interfering with neutral trading rights, the British continued their policy of impressment. Although no one knows exactly how many U.S. citizens were impressed in the years leading up to the War of 1812, estimates run from thirty-eight hundred to more than ten thousand.

In late 1806, President Jefferson authorized William Pinkney to sail to Great Britain. Pinkney joined James Monroe on a mission to soothe U.S.-British tensions. After several months of negotiation, the Monroe-Pinkney Treaty with Great Britain was signed on December 31, 1806.

Why did Jefferson refuse to submit the Monroe-Pinkney Treaty to the Senate for ratification?

The Monroe-Pinkney Treaty addressed various points of contention revolving around British restrictions on U.S. trade, but failed to address the issue of impressment. Jefferson used this omission as an excuse to not submit the treaty to the Senate for ratifica-

tion. Also contributing to his decision were his intense dislike of Britain, his belief that monarchies caused wars, and a desire to avoid any repeat of the outcry over the Jay Treaty—which had been viewed as a capitulation to Great Britain. Tensions continued between the two countries.

How did the continuing impressment of sailors affect relations with Great Britain?

In 1807, the HMS *Leopard* stopped the U.S. naval vessel the USS

Chesapeake. When the U.S. captain refused to allow the British to search for deserters from the British navy, the British captain opened fire, killing three and wounding eighteen. He also removed four sailors. This attack on a U.S. naval vessel led to calls for war. Jefferson refused to give in to popular demand. Instead, he ordered British warships out of U.S. waters and instructed the U.S. minister in London, James Monroe, to demand an apology and a halt to impressment. British Foreign Secretary George Canning was eager to avert a war with the United States because he was concerned that war might divert Britain’s resources from its battle with Napoleon, but he did not give in completely. He noted that the admiral responsible for the order that led to the attack on the *Chesapeake* had been dismissed, but he refused to bend on the question of impressment.

Faced with continuing European interference with its neutral trading rights, the United States turned to an economic approach that became known as “peaceable coercion.”

What was “peaceable coercion” and why did it fail?

Jefferson had a new and radical view of diplomacy. He believed that nations should be linked by trade and that U.S. commerce

(instead of war), could be a weapon of diplomacy. Recalling lessons learned during the years leading up to the American Revolution, the United States attempted to exert economic pressure on France and England in an effort to gain respect for neutral trading rights. The United States chose to send a strong message by imposing an all-out embargo that stopped all trade. Passage of the Embargo Act of 1807 confined all U.S. ships to harbor in an effort to deny France and Great Britain agricultural and manufactured products.

“The decrees of France prohibit us from trading with Great Britain. The orders of Great Britain prohibit us from trading with France. And what do we do? Why, in direct subservience to the edicts of each, we prohibit our citizens from trading with either. I ask in what page of the Constitution you find the power of laying an embargo? It is nowhere directly given. You have it, then, by construction, or by precedent. By construction, it would be based on the power to regulate. I leave aside the commonplace argument that

regulation cannot mean annihilation, and that what is annihilated cannot be regulated. I ask this question: Can a power ever be obtained by construction which had never been exercised at the time of the authority given?”

—Josiah Quincy, Federalist congressman from Massachusetts, speech to the House of Representatives, November 1808

As it turned out, Jefferson had miscalculated. The embargo did not severely harm the economies of Britain and France. In fact, the U.S. economy was hurt far more. Thousands were put out of work and there was widespread public dissent.

Intense domestic pressure and the failure of the policy led Jefferson to sign legislation repealing the Embargo Act shortly before leaving office in 1809. Yet, even in the twilight of his presidency, he made one more effort to find a solution to the trade problem.

How did the Nonintercourse Act affect trade?

Passed by a lame-duck Congress only days before the end of Jefferson’s administration, the Nonintercourse Act of 1809 forbade all

trade with both France and Great Britain as well as their colonies. The act also allowed the president to reopen trade with whichever belligerent nation removed its restrictions on U.S. trade first. This act opened U.S. ports to all other traders, (though most of U.S. trade had been with Britain and France), and encouraged smuggling. Any captain simply had to announce that his ship was engaged in coastal trade within the United States or trade with countries other than Great Britain and France to gain permission to leave port. Smuggling



The adverse effect of the embargo is shown in this cartoon. “Ograbme” is embargo spelled backwards.

became the name of the game. This act soon proved to be ineffective, and the problems with Britain and France continued.

Madison’s First Administration (1809-1813)

Virginian James Madison already had an outstanding political career before he became president in 1809. The primary author of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, his formidable political intellect had put him at the center of all of the young nation’s political debates. He was a long-time friend of Jefferson as well as Jefferson’s secretary of state. It was now Madison’s turn to assume the highest political office in the United States.

In an effort to reopen trade between the United States and Britain, David Erskine, British minister to the United States, opened negotiations with U.S. Secretary of State Robert Smith in April 1809. The resulting Erskine Agreement stated that Britain would drop its requirement that U.S. ships stop to be searched in Britain for war materials in return for an agreement from the United States not to trade with France. Madison was pleased with this agreement. He announced that on June 10, 1809 trade would reopen with Britain, while remaining closed with France. Unfortunately for the United States, Erskine’s bargain did not meet with approval from the British foreign secretary, who swiftly rejected the agreement. The agreement was not turned down quickly enough to stop a large number of U.S. ships from embarking to Great Britain, where they were seized. Soon thereafter, Madison reinstated a policy of no trade with Great Britain.

What was the purpose of Macon’s Bill #2?

Congress continued to try to resolve the difficult situation. In an effort to curb smuggling, in May 1810 Macon’s Bill #2 replaced the Nonintercourse Act. This law reversed the conditions imposed by the Nonintercourse Act. Now trade was reopened with both France and Great Britain, but the first belligerent who agreed to cease its interference with U.S. trade would be rewarded by an embargo

on the remaining belligerent. This time France moved more quickly when Napoleon’s Foreign Secretary Duc de Cadore agreed in a letter to the terms outlined in Macon’s Bill #2. Following France’s commitment, the United States discontinued trade with Great Britain.

While U.S. leaders tried to respond to the manipulations of Britain and France so that they could maintain rights to conduct trade, domestic politics changed significantly. In the elections of 1810, voters sent many young westerners to Congress. The new Congress chose Henry Clay, a young Kentuckian, as Speaker of the House.

Why did Henry Clay steer the United States towards war with Great Britain?

Clay and his allies were not particularly affected by the impressment of U.S. sailors, nor by trade issues, but they did regard these



Henry Clay, Speaker of the House.

issues as insults to the U.S. flag. More importantly, they viewed this as an opportune time to acquire land on the frontier and even to conquer Canada, a British colony. Clay and a group of fellow congressmen were soon labeled “war hawks” because they favored war with Great Britain.

“Is one of the fairest portions of the globe to remain in a state of nature, the haunt of a few wretched savages, when it seems destined by the Creator to give support to a large population, and to be the seat of civilization, of science, and of true religion?”

—Ohio Governor William Henry Harrison

These expansionist desires were nothing new. In 1809, Ohio Governor William Henry Harrison had gotten three Native American chiefs drunk and convinced them to sign away three million acres of land. In response, the Shawnee Chief Tecumseh formed a confederacy of tribes to resist westward expansion. After several years of fighting, a full-scale battle took place in 1811 at the Tippecanoe River. Both sides lost many soldiers, but the Native Americans withdrew. After the battle, some of the weapons abandoned by the Native Americans were found to be of Canadian origin. The “war hawks” of Congress assumed the British had armed the Native Americans. Their cry of the day became “On to Canada.”

With Britain occupied with Napoleon, Canada seemed like it could be easily conquered. Others regarded the Spanish colony

of Florida to be ripe for acquisition. In the early months of 1812, Clay, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, Felix Grundy of Tennessee, and others began to steer the Congress towards a harsher policy toward Great Britain. To help make their case, the war hawks used anger over British impressment of U.S. sailors, and the negative effect of Macon’s Bill #2 on U.S. trade. In addition, they called attention to Native American raids on the western frontier that they blamed on Great Britain.

Many of the East Coast seafaring states who were most affected by the violations of U.S. neutrality were opposed to war. Nonetheless, the House recommended preparation for war with Great Britain.

What steps did Congress take to prepare for war?

Congress passed bills to outfit the army and navy. Taxation was increased to pay for the expanding military. Finally, to clear the ocean of U.S. ships, Congress passed a secret ninety-day embargo. When word leaked out, hundreds of ships put to sea to escape the impending embargo’s painful economic effects. In the spring of 1812, the divisions among the public over what steps to take next were sharp. Although many people in the United States were opposed to war because they felt their country was unprepared, it seemed to others that despite the dangers that might be involved, there were few choices left if the United States wanted to retain its honor and defend its rights. In early June President Madison took the issue to Congress.

June 1812: The Moment of Decision

On June 1, 1812, President Madison presented a list of grievances against Great Britain to Congress. Aware of the delicate separation of powers outlined in the Constitution, Madison placed the decision in the hands of the Congress. Madison and his cabinet believed that war with Great Britain was necessary, yet Madison was aware of how divided the country was on the subject. He also knew that the future of the Democratic-Republican party depended on its ability to make a broad national appeal.

The debate in Congress would be of critical importance to the nation's future. Congress

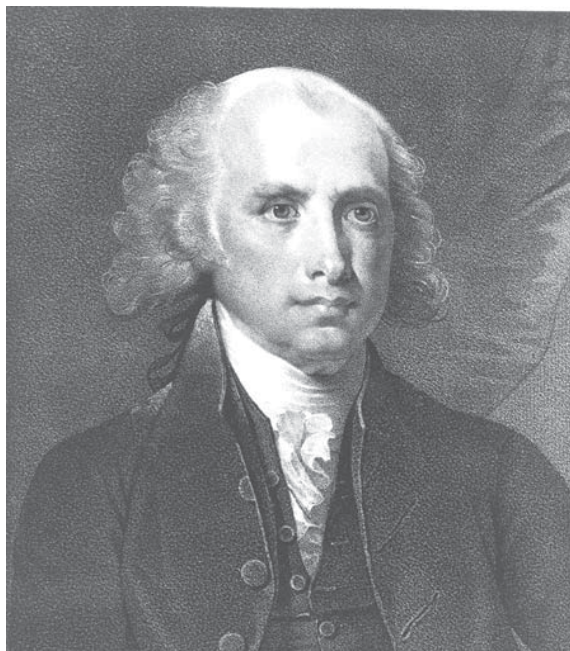
faced fundamental issues involving war and peace, as well as the U.S. relationship with Europe in general and Great Britain in particular. While a range of opinions existed, four principal options had emerged by June 1812.

In the coming days, you will have the opportunity to consider the range of alternatives debated in Congress. Each of the four options that you will explore is based on a particular set of beliefs and values. Identifying these values will help you better understand U.S. history and the forces that shaped the country.

War Message to Congress, June 1, 1812 James Madison, President of the United States

“Our moderation and conciliation have had no other effect than to encourage perseverance and to enlarge pretensions. We behold our seafaring citizens still the daily victims of lawless violence, committed on the great common and highway of nations, even within sight of the country which owes them protection. We behold our vessels, freighted with the products of our soil and industry, or returning with the honest proceeds of them, wrested from their lawful destinations, confiscated by prize courts no longer the organs of public law but the instruments of arbitrary edicts, and their unfortunate crews dispersed and lost, or forced or inveigled in British ports into British fleets.... We behold, in fine, on the side of Great Britain a state of war against the United States, and on the side of the United States a state of peace toward Great Britain....

“Whether the United States shall continue passive under these progressive usurpation and accumulated wrongs, or, opposing force to force in the defense of their national rights... is a solemn question which the Constitution wisely confides to the legislative department of the Government.”



President James Madison.

Library of Congress.

Options in Brief

Option 1: Defend Rights and Honor Through Unlimited War

In 1776, the American colonies resorted to force when accommodation with Great Britain no longer seemed possible. This point has been reached again. After nearly two decades of continuous interference with U.S. trade on the high seas, it is time that the United States stops fooling itself. We must use the only language Great Britain understands: force. Already our sailors and our families on the western frontier have been subjected to British force either through its navy or its Indian agents. If we wish to preserve national honor and avoid falling back into a state of colonial subjugation, we must act now. The time for talk is over. The time for action is upon us. Let us declare war and establish independence yet again from the contemptuous and haughty British.

Option 2: Defend Rights and Honor Through Limited Maritime War

British provocations necessitate action. Their attacks on U.S. shipping and continued impressment of U.S. sailors require a response. Negotiations have failed and embargoes have not caused Britain to stop interfering with our rights on the high seas. Our response should be limited to the oceans. Why risk the devastation of U.S. soil with a land war when the battle revolves around freedom of the seas? A limited war aimed at undermining Britain's ability to trade freely will accomplish our goals without risking our cities and farms. As we learned during the period of the Quasi-War with France, much can be gained at sea with little cost at home. Furthermore, a limited naval war does not involve creating a large army which could be a threat to our constitutional republic. Respond, yes! But it should be a limited response aimed at the source of these injustices.

Option 3: Delay Armed Conflict Until Prepared

British injustices are severe. Our sailors are impressed at an alarming rate. Our neutral trade is suffering. Our western frontier is under attack by the Indians acting as agents of the British. Now, however, is not the time for action. Neither our navy nor our army is prepared to resist one of the world's greatest powers. After years of neglect under the Jefferson and Madison administrations, how can our armed forces resist the victors at Trafalgar and the battle-tested soldiers of the Duke of Wellington? At this time, discretion is the better part of valor. Without appropriate preparations, all we have gained over the past twenty-nine years could be lost. Economic sanctions allow us to respond to British interference while we prepare for the war that is coming.

Option 4: Rights and Honor Are Not Worth Bloodshed

Why war? What do we stand to gain from the resort to force? Granted, Great Britain has interfered with U.S. trade and subjected U.S. sailors to impressment. But should an entire nation be put at risk to protect the profits and livelihoods of a few? War with one of the world's great powers risks devastation and destruction on an unprecedented scale. Have we already forgotten the misery that accompanied the American Revolution? Today Britain is only stronger and better prepared after nearly twenty years of warfare with France. In addition, like it or not, a declaration of war against Britain makes us the allies of one of the world's most bloodthirsty and autocratic rulers—Napoleon. Is this what we fought for in 1776? The right to support tyranny against liberty? Finally, what about the threat to the republican system at home? War with Britain will mean creating an army that will require new taxes. Is it worth risking our republic and our property in the name of rights and honor?

Option 1: Defend Rights and Honor Through Unlimited War

The United States can no longer put up with the outrages perpetrated against it by Great Britain. Marauding Indians on the frontier, the ruthless impressment of our sailors, the seizure of our ships: Britain has pushed us too far. We must act now.

In 1776, we decided we could no longer tolerate British oppression and declared independence. Since that time, Great Britain has continually attempted to keep its former colonies in a dependent position.

The British view control of the seas as essential to their survival. In their view, there is no right to neutral shipping. Any ship heading to France is considered fair game for seizure and sale. This interference must stop. Our nation's commerce depends on the right of neutral shipping.

Britain's insatiable need for sailors in its navy has also led it to impress U.S. sailors on the high seas. Although claiming only to be interested in capturing and returning British sailors who have fled the harsh conditions of its navy, Britain has also frequently impressed native-born as well as naturalized Americans. The practice of impressment is a violation of U.S. rights and has resulted in violence against Americans. We will not tolerate these insults to our nation's honor any longer.

On the western frontier, Great Britain incites the Indians to massacres of unspeakable brutality. The British have unleashed terror on the frontier through their Indian allies. Have they no shame? Where is the honor in having others massacre innocent settlers? It is time for us to claim this land as our own and to strike back against the source of British aggression on this continent—Canada.

It is time that we stop trying to speak a language of accommodation and compromise that Britain does not understand. Force is the language of the British. To maintain its independence and preserve its honor, the United States must abandon negotiation and fight fire with fire.

Our forefathers triumphed less than three decades ago against the British. Let us make sure they did not spill their blood in vain and sacrifice lives for a short-lived experiment in constitutional government. The time for talk has passed. The United States' rights, honor, and credibility must be preserved. Without them, independence is just a meaningless word.

Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 1

1. The honor and pride of the United States are at stake. The United States cannot suffer under the monarchical tyranny of Great Britain ever again.

2. The United States should have the right to trade with any nation as it sees fit.

3. Force is the only message that Great Britain will understand.

4. The land on the frontiers and in possession of the Indians as well as the British colonial possession of Canada ultimately should belong to the United States.

Supporting Arguments for Option 1

1. Great Britain has ignored our good-faith efforts to negotiate solutions, has refused to honor its treaty obligations with us, and has incited Indians on the frontier. British impressment of seamen and limitations on our trade shows that they are treating us like we are still their colonies. Force was what compelled them to accede to our demands during the War of Independence. Force is what will stop them now.

2. Expansion to the west will bring valuable land to our farmers, offer more opportunities for trade, and quell the troublesome Indians. Declaring war will allow us to take these lands.

3. Britain's Orders in Council have stifled our economic growth. We have not been able to trade with France or with other European nations as is our right. We must insist on our rights as an independent nation.

From the Historical Record

Felix Grundy, congressman from Tennessee

“What, Mr. Speaker are we now called on to decide? It is whether we will resist by force the attempt made by that government to subject our maritime rights to the arbitrary and capricious rule of her will; for my part I am not prepared to say that this country shall submit to have her commerce interdicted or regulated by any foreign nation. Sir, I prefer war to submission. Over and above these unjust pretensions of the British government, for many years past they have been in the practice of impressing our seamen from merchant vessels; this unjust and lawless invasion of personal liberty calls loudly for the interposition of this government. This war, if carried on successfully, will have its advantages. We shall drive the British from our continent—they will no longer have an opportunity of intriguing with our Indian neighbors, and setting on the ruthless savage to tomahawk our women and children.”

Richard M. Johnson, congressman from Kentucky

“...we must now oppose the farther en-

croachments of Great Britain by war, or formally annul the Declaration of our Independence, and acknowledge ourselves her devoted colonies.... Before we relinquish the conflict, I wish to see Great Britain renounce the piratical system of paper blockade; to liberate our captured seamen on board her ships of war; relinquish the practice of impressment on board our merchant vessels; to repeal her Orders in Council; and cease, in every other respect, to violate our neutral rights; to treat us as an independent people.”

Henry Clay, Speaker of the House of Representatives

“What are we to gain by war, has been emphatically asked? In reply, he would ask, what are we not to lose by peace?—commerce, character, a nation's best treasure, honor! If pecuniary considerations alone are to govern, there is sufficient motive for the war. Our revenue is reduced, by the operation of the belligerent edicts, to about six million of dollars, according to the Secretary of the Treasury's report. The year preceding the embargo it was sixteen....”

John C. Calhoun, congressman from North Carolina

“I believe that in four weeks from the time a declaration of war is heard on our frontier, the whole of Upper Canada and a part of Lower Canada will be in our power.”

John Rhea, congressman from Tennessee

“Not long after the Treaty of Peace, England began her course of inimical depre- dations, and increasing them in number and in magnitude, in proportion from the time of their beginning, has steadily persevered in the execution of them to the present day; and all that time the United States have persevered in their endeavors, by negotiation, to obtain an amicable settlement of differences. Yes, they have persevered, in a manner bordering too near to humiliation, to avoid war and to live at peace; but every friendly proposition has been rejected, and it seems as if nothing but the reduction of this nation to a servile state of colonial existence, can satiate the appetite of voracious England. If, then, war shall be, let England look to it—human blood, in the event, will be poured out, and will flow to increase that ocean of blood that loudly calls for re- tribution. In relation to the issue of a war, the United States have nothing to fear; for on this side is arrayed eternal justice, unfurling her flaming standard and conducting to victory.”

Andrew Jackson, Volunteers to Arms

“For what are we going to fight? To satisfy the revenge or ambition of a corrupt and infatuated ministry? To place another and another diadem on the head of an apostate republican general? To settle the balance of power among an assassin tribe of kings and emperors? Or to preserve to the prince of Blood, and the grand dignitaries of the empire their overgrown wealth and privileges? No. Such splendid achievements as these can form no part of the objects of an American war. But we are going to fight for the reestablishment of our national character, misunderstood and vilified at home and abroad; for the protection of our maritime citizens, impressed on board British ships of war and compelled to fight the battles of our enemies against ourselves; to vindicate our right to free trade, and open a market for the

productions of our soil, now perishing on our hands because the mistress of the ocean has forbid us to carry them to any foreign nation; in fine, to seek some indemnity for past inju- ries, some security against future aggressions, by the conquest of all the British dominions upon the continent of north America. Here then is the true and noble principle on which the energies of the nation should be brought into action: a free people compelled to reclaim by power of their arms the right which God has bestowed upon them, and which an infatu- ated King has said they shall not enjoy.”

John C. Calhoun's report to the House of Representa- tives from the Committee on Foreign Relations

“But the period has now arrived, when the United States must support their character and station among the nations of the earth, or submit to the most shameful degradation. For- bearing has ceased to be a virtue. War on the one side, and peace on the other, is a situation as ruinous as it is disgraceful. The mad ambi- tion, the lust of power, and commercial avarice of Great Britain, arrogating to herself the complete dominion of the ocean, and exercis- ing over it an unbounded and lawless tyranny, have left to neutral nations an alternative only between the base surrender of their rights, and a manly vindication of them. Happily for the United States, their destiny, under the aid of Heaven, is in their own hands. The crisis is formidable only by their love of peace.... Your committee, believing that the free-born sons of America are worthy to enjoy the liberty which their fathers purchased at the price of so much blood and treasure, and seeing in the measures adopted by Great Britain, a course commenced and persisted in, which must lead to a loss of national character and independence, feel no hesitation in advising resistance by force; in which the Americans of the present day will prove to the enemy and to the world, that we have not only inherited that liberty which our fathers gave us, but also the will and power to maintain it. Relying on the patriotism of the nation, and confidently trusting that the Lord of Hosts will go with us to battle in a righteous cause, and crown our efforts with success, your committee recommends an immediate appeal to arms.”

Option 2: Defend Rights and Honor Through Limited Maritime War

British provocations necessitate action. Let us protect our ocean-going trade and our sailors. We must stop Britain's violations of our rights on the high seas. Turn loose our skillful sailors and new navy and strike a blow for what is right.

Britain's interference with U.S. shipping, its impressment of U.S. sailors, and its incitement of the Indians on the western frontier require a serious response. The time for talk is over. Britain does not give us the respect that we deserve, and it is time to send a clear message.

But the use of force should be limited to the U.S. navy and authorized privateers. Do we seriously believe that we can beat the mighty armies Britain has mustered to contain Napoleon? Do we dare risk the hardship of foreign soldiers on our soils? The majority of our grievances revolve around British naval actions. Since the British are most vulnerable on the high seas, the U.S. response should focus on this theater.

As we learned during the state of war with France, the United States can wring the necessary concessions from a European power without a prolonged and costly ground war. The use of U.S. naval vessels as well as privateers authorized by letters of marque will enable the United States to strike at the lifelines of the British war effort. As an island nation engaged in a life and death struggle with a continental power, the British are extremely vulnerable to interference with their shipping. Interfering with its trade will be the quickest way to get our antagonist's attention.

In addition, a naval conflict allows the United States to avoid the devastation that is associated with a ground war. Our citizens can be spared the trauma of war while sailors exchange salvos on the high seas. Civilians will also be spared the costs of sustaining the large army necessary for ground war operations against the British. Let us not compound the problems caused by the British by reinstating taxes that strike at the heart of every U.S. citizen's right to spend his income as he sees fit.

The time to act is now. The place to act is on the high seas. Interference with the United States' neutral trading rights and impressment of our sailors must be stopped by an aggressive campaign at sea. A limited maritime war is our best option. Rights and honor are defended without the costs and bloodshed associated with an unlimited war.

Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 2

1. The United States should have the right to trade with any nation as it sees fit.
2. Neutral nations should not be made to suffer because the major powers have engaged in the folly of war.

3. The British did not respond to our requests during the colonial period until we defeated them on the battlefield. They will not concede anything except by force. Today, the battlefield is the high seas.

Supporting Arguments for Option 2

1. A declaration of unlimited war is too risky for the United States. The army of the United States is small and inexperienced. Britain has been battling the mighty armies of Napoleon. We would be foolhardy to think we could defeat the experienced army of Britain.
2. Our sailors are skilled and our merchant ships numerous. We should play to our strengths. We should arm our merchant ships

and provide them with letters of marque so that they can strike out at British interests. The use of force against British ships will be the quickest and in the long run most successful way to get them to respect our rights.

3. There is no advantage to be gained from adding Canadian territory to our country. This will only tip the delicate political balance in favor of the northern states.

From the Historical Record

Chauncey Goodrich, senator from Connecticut

“Our course is to use our endeavours to free our commerce from the fangs of the Law, to fortify our most prominent harbors, to equip and man our navy—to provide a means of defence—and there to pause.”

John Jacob Astor, New York merchant

“...we are full of speculation and conjecture as to the measures to be next adopted by government. Some say war with England and others with France and England while some believe that all restriction on commerce will be taking off [sic] and that our merchant vessels be permitted to arm. This I believe will meet the more general approbation.”

Samuel Mitchill, congressman from New York

“An embargo ought to be accompanied with another—with letters of marque and reprisal. We ought to let the cannon accompany the flag. The voice of the cannon ought to speak the voice of the nation, under the stripes of the nation.

James Monroe, Secretary of State

“I am convinced that it is very important to attempt, at present, the maritime war only.”

James A. Bayard, senator from Delaware, in a letter to his son

“The Western and Southern Gentlemen are alarmed by a point very seriously insisted upon by the Northern—that in case Canada be conquered, that it shall be divided into States and inalienably incorporated into the Union. You will see the great and permanent weight which such an event would throw into the northern scale. No proposition could have been more frightful to the southern men, and it seems they had never thought of what they were to do with Canada before, in case they conquered the country, but they prefer that Canada should remain a British Province rather than becomes States of America. The consequence has been that they now begin to talk of maritime war, and of the ocean being the only place where G. Britain is tangible. What I am now telling you is not an affair generally or publicly spoken of. It has existed

but a short time and passes as yet in whispers and a semi-confidential way. I am inclined to think it true and likely to produce important results.”

Pennsylvania Senator Andrew Gregg, Resolution to House Declaration of War

“Resolved, That the bill, entitled ‘An act declaring war between Great Britain and her dependencies, and the United States and their Territories,’ be recommitted to the committee to whom was committed the Message of the President, of the 1st instant, with instructions to modify and amend the same, in such manner that the President of the United States shall have power to authorize the public armed ships and vessels of the United States to make reprisals upon the public and private ships and vessels, goods, and merchandise, belonging to the Crown of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, or to the subjects thereof; and also to grant letters of marque and reprisal, under suitable regulations, to be provided in the bill, to private armed ships and vessels to make like reprisals.”

U.S. Navy Commodore Stephen Decatur

“The plan which appears to me to be the best calculated for our little navy...would be to send them out with as large a supply of provisions as they can carry, distant from our coast and singly, or not more than two frigates in company, without giving them any specific instructions as to place of cruising, but to rely on the enterprise of the officers.”

Virginia Senator William Branch Giles, Resolution to the House Declaration of War

“Resolved, That the bill, entitled ‘An act declaring war between Great Britain and her dependencies, and the United States and their territories,’ be recommitted to the committee...with instructions to modify and amend the bill, in such manner as to authorize the President of the United States to instruct the commanders of all ships of war belonging to the United States to recapture any vessel thereof bound to any port or place prohibited to such vessel by the British orders in council,... which may have been previously captured by any British armed vessel; and, also, to capture any British armed vessel which shall resist such recapture, or be found hovering on the coasts of the United States for the purpose of interrupting their lawful commerce, and to bring the same into any port of the United States for adjudication and condemnation. And, further, to instruct the commanders of all ships of war belonging to the United States, to recapture any vessel of the United States navigating the ocean conformably to the laws of nations, which may have been previously captured by any French armed vessel; and also to capture any such French armed capturing vessel, and, in like manner, to bring in the same for adjudication and condemnation. And to authorize the President of the United States to cause letters of marque and general reprisal upon the public and private ships and vessels, goods, and merchandise, belonging to the crown of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, or to the subjects thereof; and, also, upon the public and private ships and vessels, goods, and merchandise, belonging to the crown of France, or to the subjects thereof.”

Option 3: Delay an Armed Conflict Until Prepared

British injustices are severe. We must prepare for war. But we are not yet ready to strike against such a powerful nation's army and navy. We need time to prepare.

Unquestionably Great Britain has gone too far. But now is not the time for us to respond with armed aggression. Neither our navy nor our army is prepared to resist one of the world's greatest powers. After years of neglect under the Jefferson and Madison administrations, how can our armed forces resist the victors of Trafalgar and the battle-tested soldiers of the Duke of Wellington? At this time, discretion is the better part of valor. The United States must proceed prudently or risk losing all it has worked so hard to gain over the past several decades.

If the United States delays a declaration of war until the fall, we can gain many months to prepare for war against the British. And prepare we must! Our armed forces are in no condition for a war. Our navy lacks the necessary vessels to battle Britain's larger ships and our army is small and unprepared. What warrior begins a conflict without the ability to inflict pain and harm on the enemy? Great Britain has only become stronger as a result of the continuous warfare with France. To expose this nation to devastating attacks by the British without the power to retaliate in kind or even the ability to defend ourselves seems to place honor and rights before common sense.

How shall we buy the time we need? On April 1, 1812, Congress instated a ninety-day embargo against Great Britain. We can extend this embargo until November and let it have its effect before launching an armed crusade against Great Britain. By November the bad weather in the Atlantic will work to our advantage, serving as a shield against British naval incursions. Stalling in this way is not a sign of weakness or indecision. Rather, it demonstrates an intelligent use of all our advantages as we prepare for battle against a powerful enemy.

Although justified in our anger, now is not the time to engage the British in a military conflict. By delaying a declaration of war, we can allow economic warfare to have its effect, put off a conflict until the natural blockade of poor weather can provide us with a military advantage, and gain valuable time to prepare for a military conflict.

Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 3

1. The United States must prepare itself for war or it risks losing its rights as a free and independent nation.

2. Engaging in unlimited war with Great Britain at this time threatens the safety of our coastal towns and cities. There is no cowardice in waiting until we are prepared.

Supporting Arguments for Option 3

1. The U.S. army and navy are much smaller and weaker than Great Britain's. The United States has few experienced troops and naval commanders, while Britain has been at war with France for a generation. Engaging in unlimited war with Great Britain at this time threatens the safety of our coastal towns and cities and puts our merchant ships in increased danger. Delay will allow time to fortify coastal towns and cities and time for U.S. merchant ships to find the safety of their ports.

2. We have successfully contained Indian aggression on the frontier at the Battle of Tippecanoe. Most of our troops

are currently engaged on the frontier and we would be foolish to relocate them now to protect our coastline. If we are going to take on battle with the British, we will need time to prepare more troops.

3. By relying on the embargo as our first defense and delaying a declaration of war until November, we will be able to buy time, prepare for war, and benefit from the seasonal advantage provided by the bad weather that begins in the Atlantic at that time. This weather will prevent Britain from bringing its forces to our shores until next spring. And this, in turn, will give us additional time to prepare our forces.

From the Historical Record

Thomas Sammons, congressman from New York

"[We] would not wish to engage in a war unless we were attacked on our own territories or brought on by our enemies, before we are prepared with an army and would for the present remove all restrictive measures for emports and exports."

Philadelphia resident Manuel Eyre to Congressman Roberts

"Would it not be best to procrastinate the time of making war until we are better prepared to strike the first blow with effect—late in the fall and winter British ships of war cannot encounter the tempestuous weather on our coasts without almost inevitable destruction—by that time the enlistments of our new army will have greatly progressed & and our sea ports better fortified?"

Obadiah German, senator from New York

"...if we were even in a state of preparation, and possessed the means of insuring a favorable issue, it would be bad policy for this

country, at the present time, to enter into war with Great Britain, although perhaps many weighty reasons might be adduced in support of such argument. I will first call the attention of the Senate to the ability and strength of the nation we are about, by this bill, to declare war against. Gentlemen ought to recollect, that Great Britain has almost constantly engaged in war for twenty years past against one of the most powerful nations that ever existed; and for a considerable part of that time, the energies of her enemy have been directed by war's favorite genius—NAPOLEON, who has succeeded in uniting nearly the whole force of the Continent of Europe against her; against that very nation which we are about to assail; and what has been the effect? Is Great Britain less powerful now, than she was twenty years ago? No, sir, this constant warfare has increased her powers instead of diminishing them. Great Britain is a wily, active nation. She has been trained to war. She will not measure her steps and movements by ours; if we are not prepared to defend our seaports, she will not wait until

we are; and should she get possession of New Orleans, it will cost much blood and treasure to dislodge her. I do not, Mr. President, draw all these discouraging pictures, or relate these lamentable facts, because I would shrink from the conflict or terrors of war, for the defence of the rights of my injured country, sooner than any gentleman of this Senate, nor with a wish that all these evils may be realized; my object is to avert them from my country. I do it, sir, to check the precipitate step of plunging my country prematurely into a war, without any of the means of making the war terrible to our enemy; and with the certainty that it will be terrible to ourselves, or at least to our merchants, our seaports, and cities. Yes, sir; the millions that your merchants will lose in consequence of this rash, this premature step, will strike them with terror and dismay from New Orleans to Maine. A country well prepared to meet war will scarcely find war necessary, but if it cannot be avoided, preparation does away half its terrors. And if gentlemen will show me an army of twenty-five thousand men, well formed, disciplined, and supplied, at the place of the grand rendezvous near Albany, give us a reasonable increase of our navy, and will place both the great belligerents on equal footing, (as I consider them equal trespassers on our rights,) then, I say, if Great Britain will not do us justice, I will vote at the proper time a declaration of war against her; and I will use my utmost exertions to make the war terrible to her, but to declare war without the means of making the enemy feel its horrors, and at a time when it must produce evil and terrors only to ourselves, strikes me with astonishment.”

James A. Bayard, senator from Delaware

“It is not enough that we have cause for war; we must see that we are prepared, and in a condition to make war. You do not go to war for the benefit of your enemy, but your own advantage; not to give proofs of a vain and heedless courage, but to assert your rights and redress your wrongs. If you commence hostilities before you are prepared to strike a blow, and while your cities, your territory, and your property on the ocean, are exposed to the mercy of a Government possessing vast

resources of war, what can you expect but to add new distresses, defeat, and disgrace to the wrongs of which you complain? It is a strange motive for war—a wish to gratify the rapacity, to swell the triumphs, and to increase the insolence of the enemy. No time has existed for years past when we had less cause to complain of the conduct of Great Britain. Her vessels of war had all been withdrawn from our coast, as he presumed, in order to avoid collisions and hostility. If the war be suspended till November, the government and the people will both be better prepared to sustain it. Postpone the war, and we will submit to the embargo till November. This will furnish time for the return of your ships and seamen. Are you provided with means to annoy the enemy, or to defend yourselves? Have you an army or navy which can make any impression? Are your exposed towns fortified and garrisoned? Was any nation ever less prepared for war? It would require the whole military force that you now possess to constitute an adequate defence for New Orleans, New York, and Newport. During the winter months you will be defended by the elements. Postpone the war till November, and we shall not have to dread an enemy on our coast till April. In the meantime, go on with your recruiting, fill up, discipline, and train an army. Take the stations, if you please, which will enable you to open an early campaign. Your trade will all have time to return before hostilities commence, and having all your ships and seamen at home, you may be prepared to put forth all your strength upon the ocean on the opening of the ensuing Spring. Shall we, by an untimely precipitancy, yielding to a fretful impatience of delay, throw our wealth into the hands of the enemy, and feed that very rapacity which it is our object to subdue or to punish? We can lose nothing by delay; much will be certainly saved; and at a moment pregnant with great events, it was most evidently our true policy to temporize. You give up no right, yield no pretension, and profit by every day in rendering the condition of the country more secure, and its attitude more formidable. The just appreciation of time is among the highest points of political sagacity.”

Option 4: Rights and Honor Are Not Worth Bloodshed

The United States and its citizens are being asked to risk too much for the sake of principles and honor. Engaging in a military conflict with Great Britain not only threatens to undermine our cherished constitutional government, it threatens the United States' existence as an independent country.

The injustices heaped upon us by the British are many. These intolerable behaviors must stop. But a war with Great Britain that would align us with the tyrant Napoleon is not the answer.

For almost two decades while Great Britain and France have engaged in an epic battle, our sailors and merchants have paid a heavy price. The loss of both men and goods to the warring parties has caused personal sorrow and financial loss. But should U.S. civilians risk death and destruction for the rights and honor of a few? Even worse, the British have continually demonstrated their interest in returning the United States to a state of colonial dependence. Why should we give the British the justification and occasion for doing so?

A war with Great Britain will cost U.S. citizens dearly. All taxes until this point will seem modest and in fact insignificant in comparison with the taxation that will be necessary to wage war against the world's strongest military power. Our War of Independence was precipitated in many ways by unjustified attempts at taxation. In addition, by resorting to war, we risk losing the millions of U.S. dollars deposited in British banks and losing our cargoes currently on the high seas.

Finally, whether we like it or not, war against the British allies us with Napoleon. Hasn't France seized more of our ships over the past five years than Great Britain has? Have we worked so hard to establish a constitutional republic at home so that we would have the freedom to support tyranny abroad? No. Freedom at home is inextricably connected to freedom abroad. The United States should not support, directly or indirectly, the work of emperors.

The risk to our nation is too great and the rewards are too few to justify war against Great Britain. Injustices have occurred, but greater injustices will occur if we choose war. Is it worth risking the demise of the world's largest constitutional republic for the rights of a few or the sake of principle? Let the costs be weighed and reason prevail.

Beliefs and Assumptions Underlying Option 4

1. Neither honor nor greed can justify bloodshed.
2. War with Great Britain aligns us with France and the tyranny of Napoleon.
3. Anything but defensive war goes against the spirit on which this nation was founded: the individual's right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Supporting Arguments for Option 4

1. Great Britain's navy commands the oceans of the world and will surely seize our merchant ships. Why provide Britain with another excuse to seize our wealth?
2. France has seized more of our ships in the past five years than Britain has. Why should we help the French by attacking Britain?
3. Indian attacks on the frontier do not justify declaring war against Great Britain. Those claiming British involvement in these attacks have been called upon to offer proof, but have consistently been unable to provide evidence to support their inflammatory claims.
4. The expense of war must be borne by our citizens. Taxes will be levied, an army must be raised, and the blood of our sons will flow. Those advocating war are those who stand to gain, not those who will pay the horrible price of war. There will be little benefit to our citizens—only increased hardships.

From the Historical Record

Josiah Quincy, congressman from Massachusetts

“If our ills were of a nature that war would remedy, if war would compensate any of our losses or remove any of our complaints, there might be some alleviation of the suffering in the charm of the prospect. But how will war upon the land protect commerce upon the ocean? What balm has Canada for wounded honor? How are our mariners benefited by a war which exposes those who are free, without promising release to those who are impressed? But it is said that war is demanded by honor. Is national honor a principle which thirsts after vengeance, and is appeased only by blood?... If honor demands a war with England, what opiate lulls that honor to sleep over the wrongs done us by France?”

John Randolph, congressman from Virginia

“An insinuation had fallen from the gentleman from Tennessee [Mr. Grundy] that the late massacre of our brethren on the Wabash had been instigated by the British government. Has the President given any such information? Has the gentleman received any

such, even informally, from any officer of this government? Is it so believed by the administration?... This insinuation was of the grossest kind—presumption the most rash, the most unjustifiable.... But is war the true remedy? Who will profit by it? Speculators; a few lucky merchants who draw prizes in the lottery; commissaries and contractors. Who must suffer by it? The people. It is their blood, their taxes, that must flow to support it.”

Excerpts from a Resolution of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts

“A war with Great Britain would furnish temptations to her Government to sequester the millions belonging to our citizens deposited in that country, and an opportunity to her navy and cruisers to sweep the ocean of the remains of our once flourishing commerce. The conquest of Canada, the only point in which she is assailable, would afford no indemnification, if achieved, for the losses to which we should be exposed upon our unprotected seaboard, and upon the ocean. Destitute as we are of a navy, and the means of immediate

maritime defence, we cannot perceive in what mode a war with this nation, so powerful on the ocean, can promise the attainment of its avowed object—the revocation of the Orders in Council.”

William Coleman, Federalist editor of The New York Evening Post

“Citizens, if pecuniary redress is your object in going to war with England, the measure is perfect madness. You will lose millions when you will gain a cent. The expense will be enormous. It will ruin our country. Direct taxes must be resorted to. The people will have nothing to pay. We once had a revenue; that has been destroyed in the destruction of our commerce.... These remarks will have little weight with men whose interest leads them to advocate war. Thousands of lives, millions of money, the flames of cities, the tears of widows and orphans, with them are light expedients when they lead to wealth and power. But to the people who must fight, if fighting must be done—who must pay if money be wanted—who must march when the trumpet sounds, and who must die when the battle bleeds—to the people I appeal. To them the warning voice is lifted. From a war they are to expect nothing but expenses and suffering—expenses disproportionate to their means, and sufferings lasting as life.”

Editor of The Boston Centinel quoted in The Weekly Register

“It is evident that under the circumstances of this country, a declaration of war would be in effect a license and a bounty offered by our government to the British fleet to scour our coasts—to sweep our remaining navigation from the ocean, to annihilate our commerce, and to drive the country, by a rapid declension, into the state of poverty and distress which attended the close of the revolutionary struggle.... Other considerations come in aid of our confidence—The proposed enemy is invol-

nerable to us, while we are on all sides open to assault. The conquest of Canada would be less useful to us than that of Nova Zembla, and could not be so easily achieved. Our red brethren, forgetful of the patriotic “talks” of their “father” JEFFERSON, would pour down upon our frontier, and our black brethren would show themselves not less enamoured with the examples of liberty taught in St. Domingo than their masters are with those derived from its mother country. New Orleans and the Floridas would pass into the hands of the enemy. Our seaports would be under a strict blockade, and the mouths of our rivers would be bridged with frigates.”

John Randolph, congressman from Virginia

“My design is simply to submit to you the views which have induced me to consider a war with England, under existing circumstances, as comporting neither with the interest nor the honor of the American people; but as an idolatrous sacrifice of both on the altar of French rapacity, perfidy, and ambition. France has for years past offered us terms of undefined commercial arrangements as the price of war with England, which hitherto we have not wanted firmness and virtue to reject. That price is now to be paid. We are tired of holding out; and, following the example of continental Europe, entangled in the artifices, or awed by the power of the Destroyer of Mankind, we are prepared to become instrumental to his projects of universal dominion. Before these pages meet your eye, the last Republic of the earth will have enlisted under the banners of the tyrant and become a party to his cause. The blood of the American freemen must flow to cement his power, to aid in stifling the last struggles of afflicted and persecuted man, to deliver up into his hands the patriots of Spain and Portugal, to establish his empire over the ocean and over the land that gave our fathers birth—to forge our own chains!”

Epilogue: The War and its Consequences

In early June of 1812 Congress hotly debated whether to declare war. While motions to limit the war to maritime engagements and even to postpone conflict came close to passing, ultimately the United States declared unlimited war on Great Britain. In the House, the measure passed by only 79-49, while in the Senate the vote was even closer—19 to 13. The debate over declaring war exposed divisions within U.S. society. In Congress these divisions and the resulting disagreements slowed decision making during the war.

Unfortunately, though British merchants had prevailed on their government to repeal the Orders in Council—the much-despised demand that U.S. ships stop in Britain for inspection—the news did not arrive in the United States until after Congress declared war.

How successful was the U.S. military effort against Great Britain?

The U.S. military was under-equipped, inexperienced, and often incompetent. The war the United States launched might be said to have consisted of two-and-a-half years of near-disasters and military mistakes. U.S.

forces suffered defeats in their attempts to invade Canada. While the U. S. Navy’s three new heavy frigates had some success and a fleet under Oliver Hazard Perry defeated the British fleet on Lake Erie, eventually the U.S. Navy was confined to port by eighty British ships operating out of Halifax, Nova Scotia. In addition, Napoleon’s defeat in 1814 allowed Great Britain to concentrate military efforts on the United States.



Gilbert Stuart.

Dolly Madison, the wife of the president, rescued this portrait of George Washington from the White House to save it from destruction and the British troops.

Not surprisingly, U.S. trade suffered as well. The British blockaded the coast of the United States and burned shipping up and down the coast. The United States authorized five hundred privateers to harass British shipping, which they did with great success, capturing over thirteen hundred British vessels. In 1814, British military forces invaded Washington, D.C. and burned parts of the nation’s capital, forcing government officials to flee. While this act was not significant militarily, it did wound the nation’s pride.

The British moved on from Washington to attack Baltimore, where the bombardment of Fort McHenry inspired Francis Scott Key



Brown University Library.

The burning of the city of Washington by British troops.

to describe the battle and its outcome in “The Star Spangled Banner.”

Ironically, the most significant U.S. military success—Andrew Jackson’s overwhelming defeat of British forces at New Orleans—came after the peace treaty had been signed at Ghent, Belgium.

Given U.S. rhetoric before the war, the Treaty of Ghent is noteworthy more for what it does not say. No mention is made of impressment or rights of neutral ships on the seas. Nor does any territory change hands. In fact, the treaty established that all land captured during the war would be returned to the previous owner.

What were the consequences of the war for the United States?

The diplomatic struggle to preserve U.S. trading rights had been largely a failure. Indeed little had been accomplished along diplomatic lines since Jefferson’s acquisition of the Louisiana Territory. The United States had declared war with little military power and much naiveté; it had risked its very existence and survived. Having fought a war without raising a large army, incurring a huge war debt, or upsetting the checks and balances of the Constitution, Americans emerged from the war in high spirits. With Jackson’s victory at New Orleans fresh in their memory, a wave of nationalism followed as the United States embarked on a period that became known as the Era of Good Feeling.

What was the Monroe Doctrine?

The challenge to construct a workable foreign policy continued in the years following the War of 1812. When President James Monroe gave his annual message to Congress in 1823, he included an idea that had originated with the British. He outlined a plan, soon labeled the Monroe Doctrine, that dealt with some of the diplomatic issues that had plagued the United States since its founding. Some historians interpret the Monroe Doctrine’s demand for no European interference in the Western hemisphere as a defense of

U.S. security and ideals. But others suggest that while the Doctrine meant “hands-off” the Western Hemisphere for the Europeans, it was also meant to give a green light for the United States to expand as it saw fit in this hemisphere.

There is some truth to both of those explanations. The desire to expand would continue to manifest itself for the rest of the century. Steadily the United States acquired territory through conflict, purchases, and annexation. By the end of the century, the United States stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean.

What kind of a relationship developed between Great Britain and the United States?

A curious development in the aftermath of the war was the improvement in the relationship with Great Britain. Both nations found that they shared some political and economic interests. For example, Britain supported the Monroe Doctrine, because the doctrine limited Spanish influence in the hemisphere. In fact, the United States could not have enforced the Monroe Doctrine without the assistance of the British Navy. And while the Treaty of Ghent contained nothing on impressment and neutral trading rights, Britain began to respect these very things in its relations with the United States. Although some tensions continued in the relationship until the end of the nineteenth century, both nations have cooperated extensively since then, particularly in regard to maintaining the balance of power in Europe. To this day, the diplomatic cooperation between the United States and Great Britain is referred to as the “special relationship.”

How did regional differences foreshadow secession?

Before the War of 1812, many New Englanders felt that war would harm their interests, which depended on maritime trade. In fact, the war did significantly limit trade and New Englanders suffered as a result. New Englanders also felt that their influence in the government was waning—each time a new state entered the Union, the voting strength of



The Hartford Convention or LEAP NO LEAP

The cartoon, “The Hartford Convention or Leap or No Leap,” depicts four New England states ready to leap back into the arms of Great Britain.

New England decreased proportionally. In protest of the war, the New England states blocked a military draft, refused to allow their militias to serve beyond state borders, and boycotted federal bond sales to finance the war.

During the war New England delegates to the Hartford Convention in 1814 proposed several constitutional amendments that would have reduced the South’s voting power in Congress. Some delegates even discussed the possibility of secession from the United States. When the delegates arrived in Washington to present their proposals, they found they had come too late. The capital was celebrating the peace treaty with Britain and Jackson’s victory at New Orleans. Their proposals fell by the wayside during the celebrations.

It was becoming clear that different regions of the country had fundamentally different interests. Foreign policy was no exception. For example, the Southern states bitterly resented

the high tariffs put on cheaper British manufactured goods during the 1820s. These tariffs forced the South to buy more expensive goods from the North. The South felt that the North was getting rich at their expense. It would be difficult to reconcile these kinds of differences.

In 1820 Congress passed the Missouri Compromise, which maintained the ratio of representatives from free and slave states in the Senate. Missouri—part of the Louisiana Purchase—became a slave state while Maine became a free state. The remainder of the purchase was split in two, and Congress believed it had solved the slavery question that had caused such contentious debate.

The factionalism (both party and regional), that manifested itself during the war prefigured divisions that would push the country to the brink of disintegration in the Civil War. The question of states’ rights had been argued by Jefferson and Madison and would

be echoed by John Calhoun in the 1830s. Two generations later the same issues would lead to the Civil War.

How did westward expansion affect Native Americans?

As the country was adding territory it was not expanding into uninhabited lands. The relentless push westward displaced Native Americans, sometimes by disease, sometimes by war, sometimes by treaties—both honored and not honored. The Native Americans who had sided with Great Britain in the War of 1812 were punished for their resistance to U.S. expansionism. In the 1820s, these tribes were ordered to the lands west of the Mississippi. This policy of removing Native Americans east of the Mississippi culminated with President Andrew Jackson’s deportation of the Cherokee tribes in Georgia—an event known as the “Trail of Tears.”

How did the War of 1812 affect concerns about national security?

In spite of the burning of the nation’s new capital and the economic devastation caused by the blockade of the nation’s ports, the War of 1812 did little to raise the alarm about the United States’ lack of military power. In

fact, the Democratic-Republicans (who were suspicious of an overly powerful central government) were particularly pleased with the “success” of the war because they had not needed to raise a large national army. Between the War of 1812 and the dawn of the twentieth century, military expenditures in peacetime years averaged less than one percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) per year. Insulated from the turmoil of the rest of the world by thousands of miles of oceans, at the start of the Civil War the United States Army numbered only about sixteen thousand.

The years leading up to the War of 1812 showed both the problems and the dreams of the new nation. The desire to prosper, to grow, and to be taken seriously by the great powers of Europe manifested themselves clearly in the words and actions of U.S. leaders, whose course of action was not without risk. With the benefit of hindsight, it seems that the United States risked its independence by choosing to fight a war it naively assumed it could win. The arguments over U.S. foreign policy and the choices faced in 1812 showed regional and political fault lines in the new country’s democracy. Fifty years later, the United States would divide along these fault lines during the Civil War—its future, once again, in jeopardy.