

Diplomacy during the War of 1812

The American declaration of war in June of 1812 shocked many British officials. Great Britain conceded everything the United States wanted except for impressment. British officials thought that revoking the ‘Orders in Council’ would be sufficient to smooth Anglo-American relations and prevent war in 1812. They were wrong, as Secretary of State James Monroe instructed his British counterpart, Augustus J. Foster. Monroe informed Foster that peace was possible only if Britain renounced the policy of impressment. American reasons for war were many, but Madison cited three factors specifically in seeking a declaration of war from Congress in 1812; they were Britain’s “Orders in Council,” the impressment of Americans into the Royal Navy, and the “inciting” of Native Americans on the frontier.¹

There was little new in Madison’s charges against Great Britain. Anglo-American relations were typically turbulent between 1783 and 1815. European events played a significant role in driving tension between Britain and the United States, and in explaining the origins of the War of 1812. Diplomatic successes eased tensions at times. Jay’s Treaty in 1794 provides one such example, though many Jeffersonian Republicans viewed the agreement as a betrayal of American principles. Nonetheless, the point is that the U.S. worked out its problems with Britain in terms that Americans could generally tolerate. While President Madison cited British violations of American rights at sea and interference on the western frontier as the primary reasons for war, it was the background of raging war in Europe that kept the two nations in conflict.

Prior to war breaking out in 1812, the U.S. situated itself as a neutral nation in the conflict between Britain and Napoleonic France. Both nations repeatedly violated the sovereignty of American vessels at sea and the U.S. government dutifully protested, but it was far too weak militarily to do much about it. Moreover, the foreign policy adopted by both Presidents Jefferson and Madison employed economic coercion as the primary weapon of American diplomatic efforts to no purpose. The closest the U.S. came to peaceful resolution with Britain was the Monroe-Pinkney Treaty of 1806 whereby Britain agreed to cease interfering with the re-export trade where American merchants carried colonial goods from the Caribbean to European ports. President Jefferson rejected the treaty because it made no mention of impressment. Jefferson’s stubbornness cost the United States a chance to renew the Jay Treaty foundation which diplomats could have built on to resolve other points of conflict. Instead, both Britain and France continued seizing ships bound for Europe as part of each nation’s war efforts. In fact, Britain snatched no fewer than 900 American vessels between 1803 and 1812 while France snagged another 500 ships. The actual number of Americans impressed will likely never be fully known, though the State Department put the number at 6,257. Most scholars accept a higher estimate closer to 10,000 sailors pressed into foreign services.²

As the war continued in Europe, both Britain and France took more drastic steps to weaken their opponents. In 1807, George Berkeley, commanding British forces at Halifax, authorized naval commanders to use force to retrieve deserters. His orders led to the *Chesapeake*

¹ James Madison, “War Message to Congress. June 1, 1812.”
<http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/historicspeeches/madison/warmessage.html> .

² J.C.A. Stagg. *The War of 1812: Conflict for a Continent* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 28-30.

Affair on 22 June 1807. The attack on the *U.S.S. Chesapeake* outraged Americans and brought cries for war throughout the nation. President Jefferson responded with a complete economic embargo that increased tensions; Britain announced its ‘Orders in Council’ in November of 1807, which President Madison cited as one of the main causes of the war in 1812. The Orders in Council were maritime restrictions that essentially cut off neutral trade with Europe. While the orders were war aims targeting France, the proclamation directly targeted the United States’ re-export trade with Europe. Combined, the *Chesapeake* affair (impressment) and the Orders in Council fueled a diplomatic row that no delegation managed to overcome without war.

Because the U.S. government remained impotent in handling either British or French transgressions at sea, the Madison administration turned to economic sanctions to shift the diplomatic balance in American favor. Macon’s Bill No. 2 (1810) essentially reopened trade with whoever ended its trade restrictions first. In some respects, this tactic worked for Madison, or at least his administration claimed that it did because Napoleon allegedly renounced his Berlin Decree of 1806, which blockaded Europe. Madison never fully convinced his critics that Napoleon had lifted the blockade. Nonetheless, Britain ultimately rescinded its Orders in Council on 16 June 1812—a concession to American diplomatic efforts that came too late. The one point that Britain refused to concede was impressment of sailors into the Royal Navy, and on this point Madison was willing to go to war.

Evidence on the American side suggests that Madison pushed the war as a means to an end—getting Britain to accept the U.S. position on maritime issues. What Madison and most Republicans failed to take into account in seeking war in 1812 was the change in leadership in Britain. New Tory leaders George Canning and Spencer Perceval came to power shortly before the U.S. declared war on Britain; neither man cared much for Americans, and when Canning became foreign secretary in 1812 the British made it clear that no ground would be given on the issue of impressment.

As the gears of war turned, Madison’s administration decided an invasion of Canada could serve American purposes diplomatically. The U.S. could not match Britain at sea in 1812, and the American military was unprepared for conflict, mainly because of Republican opposition to standing armed forces. Nonetheless, Canada should be an easy target and adequate leverage to bully Britain. “War Hawks” parroted Jefferson’s quip that it would be “a mere matter of marching” to take Canada, thereby forcing Britain to accede to American demands. Unfortunately for Madison, early military forays into Canadian territory turned disastrous quickly; the U.S. would not have Canada as part of its diplomatic arsenal against Britain.

The poor showing on land in the earliest campaigns likely would have softened the American position, but the small navy sent out by the U.S. performed better than expected. These unanticipated outcomes in early fighting prompted both nations to accept a series of conventions, starting in November of 1812, that addressed the treatment of prisoners of war. However, even these agreements did not lead to greater progress on the diplomatic front. A possible turn in events presented itself in March of 1813 when Russia offered to mediate the Anglo-American conflict, a proposition Madison readily accepted. Unfortunately, Britain remained uncompromising, rejecting the offer of mediation. The British position made sense

given the turn of events in Europe where Napoleon lost approximately 600,000 men in his failed invasion of Russia.

The year 1813 brought more mixed results militarily for the United States and little progress diplomatically. The U.S. could not exploit military successes such as those on Lake Erie or at the Battle of the Thames River where Tecumseh was killed largely because of poor coordination and a growing financial crisis, which hindered the entire war effort. There was a possibility of a truce at the end of 1813, but Napoleon's defeat at Leipzig made it unlikely that the American delegation would bend Britain to U.S. demands on the issue of impressment.

Facing even greater difficulties in prosecuting the war in 1814, especially financially, and Napoleon's defeat in Europe dimmed American prospects for victory as Britain began shifting veteran forces to Canada. In light of these events, the Madison administration dropped its demands regarding impressment in June, and then Madison authorized U.S. delegates to accept peace on terms of a return to the *status quo ante bellum*. Essentially, Madison officially gave up resolving the main issues that warranted a declaration of war in 1812. Given the situation by July, even these terms seemed overly optimistic. By August the U.S. was ready to accept direct peace negotiations offered by Britain as a counter to Russian mediation. Madison sent John Quincy Adams, Albert Gallatin, Henry Clay, Jonathan Russell, and James A. Bayard to represent the U.S. Britain sent William Adams, James Lord Gambier, and Henry Goulburn as its delegates.

While negotiations began in Europe on August 8, the war in North America continued with mixed results. There were American successes along the northern border, but the U.S. also suffered the humiliation of its capitol being torched by British invaders. Yet British forces failed to exploit the momentum at Baltimore to any advantage. Negotiators remained obstinate on the British side according to the American delegates, and most American historians argue that the American delegation performed admirably given the fact that they had no military momentum to pressure Britain to accept terms. Britain, for its side, sought terms that would protect its native allies, settle a northern border in Maine and Minnesota, demilitarize the Great Lakes, address fishing rights along Canada's eastern coast, and secure Canada from American expansion. The American delegation divided on some of the terms proposed by Britain, especially fishing rights. For delegate Henry Clay, fishing rights mattered little, while for John Quincy Adams, a New Englander, fishing rights were important.

Ultimately, the treaty signed at Ghent in December of 1814 mentioned none of the maritime issues that Madison used to justify war in 1812. As historian Donald Hickey points out, the delegates offered little defense of the treaty they signed beyond ending the war "without sacrificing any honor, territory, or right."³ Essentially, the Treaty of Ghent returned everything to the *status quo antebellum*—no territory changed hands and the borders between the United States and Canada remained ill-defined. As in past conflicts, Native Americans lost out as neither side represented or considered their interests. In effect, Native Americans in the Old Northwest Territory would be at the mercy of the United States after 1815. As a final note, the War of 1812 did little to alter the balance of power in North America, but in a strange way its

³ Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 297.

outcome opened the door for gradually better terms in Anglo-American relations. The first evidence of this change in relations came shortly after the war in the Convention of 1818, which finally addressed some of the maritime issues raised in negotiations to end the War of 1812.

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FURTHER READING:

Convention of 1818 between the United States and Great Britain,
http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/conv1818.asp

Memorandum of a Conversation with Augustus J. Foster, 23 June 1812
<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/03-04-02-0534>

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