

The War Hawks of 1812

While a number of scholars have argued that several presidents have abused their power as commander-in-chief by acting unilaterally or taking the country into wars of choice than of necessity, Congress has often encouraged, enabled, or emboldened the presidency in such matters. It has specifically declared war in five conflicts and authorized the use of force in a number of other circumstances. Congress has been a co-actor in the display of American military power. This was the case in 1812 as the country debated and prepared for war with Great Britain. Those most enthusiastic for war and who led the case for war in Congress were a faction within the majority party known to history as the War Hawks.

The president of the United States is commonly viewed as the primary actor in matters of war and peace. The president, after all, is designated in Article II of the Constitution as the “Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States.” Furthermore, the president is vested with the powers to negotiate treaties and appoint and receive ambassadors. But, Congress also plays a major role.

The Congress has its own impressive array of constitutional powers. In Article I, the Constitution vests a number of war and foreign policy powers in the Congress. These powers include the power to declare war, repel attacks on the country, regulate international commerce, ratify or reject treaties, provide “advice and consent” on the president’s choices for ambassador and the cabinet, establish immigration laws, provide for the armed forces, erect military installations, pursue and punish illegal actions that occur on international waters, and decide upon procedures governing prisoners of war.

In 1812, James Madison became the first wartime president of the United States. As opponents decried, he led the country into “Mr. Madison’s War.” Later in the year, in a campaign against DeWitt Clinton, the mayor of New York City, he became the first wartime president to seek and then win re-election.

On June 1, 1812, Madison asked the Congress for a declaration of war against Great Britain. The British, Madison explained, was in “a state of war against the United States.” In a series of usurpations and wrongs, Britain had repeatedly violated American neutrality, interfered with American trade and commerce, blockaded American seaports, and impressed into military service Americans captured in international waters. The Congress soon enough approved a war declaration, thereby making the War of 1812 a constitutional war as opposed to a presidential war as suggested by the war opposition. With its support, the Twelfth Congress, also known as the “War Congress,” became the first wartime legislature under the U.S. Constitution.

War is not always an act of mere patriotism, the final resort in matters of national security. War also involves politics, and the process of going to war can be an act of partisanship. Some wars, such as World War I and World War II, were bipartisan wars. A bipartisan war is one that received overwhelming if not near universal support from both major political parties in power in the Congress. This was not the case for the War of 1812. This war was a partisan war.

Madison was president at a time of unified party government. That is, his party, the Democratic-Republican Party, simultaneously controlled the presidency and both houses of Congress. During the 12th Congress (1811-1813), the Democratic Republicans held approximately 82% of the seats in the Senate (28 to 6) and 75% in the House of Representatives (106 to 36).

Of the seventeen states at the time, the Democratic-Republican Party held all the congressional seats in six states: Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Ohio, and New Jersey. Furthermore, it commanded a majority of seats in seven others: North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New York, New Hampshire, and Vermont. In the Senate, the Democratic Republicans possessed all seats from thirteen states and shared the seats in two other states. The Federalist Party held all the congressional seats in Connecticut, Rhode Island, and Delaware, and a majority of the seats in Massachusetts. It also held the Senate seats from Connecticut and Delaware. This party distribution was crucial for the war declaration against Britain to be approved by the Congress. For without this level of partisan control, the Federalists and their Democratic-Republican allies would surely have defeated the war measure.

On June 4, the House of Representatives voted 79 to 49 for war against Great Britain. Later, on June 17, the Senate, under the leadership of William Crawford of Georgia, approved Madison's request for war 19 to 13. Congress granted Madison "the whole land and naval force of the United States." It was Congress' first war declaration. The war vote revealed a strong partisan division between the Democratic-Republican Party and Federalist Party. As one scholar explained, "every vote for war was Republican." A supermajority of Democratic Republicans in the House and Senate voted for the war, while all of the Federalists, regardless of region, voted against it.

The voting behavior of the Virginia delegation, the largest state delegation in the House, is illustrative of the partisan nature of the war vote. Though not normally defined among the war's agitators, almost all the Virginia Democratic Republicans voted for the war and the key measures preparing for war. The most "aggressive" in their voting were Burwell Bassett, William Burwell, Matthew Clay, John Clopton, John Dawson, Thomas Gholson, Jr., Peterson Goodwyn, Aylett Hawes, William McCoy, Hugh Nelson, Thomas Newton, Jr., James Pleasants, John Roane, John Smith, and John Taliaferro. John Randolph was the notable exception. As one of the old school Republicans, he opposed his president and his party on the war.

Like their colleagues from New England and the Mid-Atlantic, the five Virginia Federalists serving in the Twelfth Congress (John Baker, James Breckinridge, Joseph Lewis, Jr., Daniel Sheffey, and Thomas Wilson) consistently opposed measures preparing for war and four of them cast votes against the declaration of war. The other was absent for the war vote.

"War Hawks" is a term used in the United States to identify those most eager for preparing the country for war and for the country to take more aggressive actions, including the use of force, in a foreign policy situation. The term may refer to members within a president's administration, to members of Congress, or to segments of the American public. Since at least the early 1790s, it has been a political epithet used against those considered "too warlike." In the case of the War of 1812, the "War Hawks" label was used, mostly by Federalists, to designate a

powerful faction within the Congress, particularly the House of Representatives. Various, the War Hawks have been identified as saber-rattlers, war enthusiasts, militant expansionists, ultra-nationalists, firebrands, and young Turks.

Who were the War Hawks? Principally and narrowly defined, they constituted a faction of Democratic-Republican newcomers, mostly freshmen elected in the 1810 midterms or sophomores, within the majority party in the Twelfth Congress. In fact, not one of the War Hawks had congressional service before 1800.

War, the War Hawks argued, was the only answer to repeated British abuses and affronts to American honor. They believed that Britain was also stirring up Indian attacks on the western frontier. They, too, strongly supported westward expansion and were desirous of adding the British colonies of Upper Canada and Lower Canada to the American union.

With their years of election, the leading War Hawks were George Troup of Georgia (1806); House Speaker Henry Clay (1810) and Richard Johnson of Kentucky (1806); John Harper of New Hampshire (1810); Peter Porter of New York (1808); John C. Calhoun (1810), Langdon Cheves (1810), William Lowndes (1810), and David Williams of South Carolina (1804); and Felix Grundy of Tennessee (1810).

More broadly construed, the War Hawks consisted of as many as sixty House members. They were a group of mostly southern and western congressmen who supported war with Great Britain and supported various measures in preparing the country for war from November 1811 to June 1812. For instance, alongside Representative Troup, the two other Georgia congressmen, William Bibb and Bolling Hall, could be counted among the War Hawks because of their solid voting records. The same was true in Tennessee where the roll call votes cast by Grundy, John Sevier, and John Rhea were virtually indistinguishable.

The War Hawks of 1812 were a congressional faction that successfully argued and agitated for war with Great Britain. While the central war aims did not fully materialize, such as the conquest of Canada, key members of this group, such as Clay and Calhoun, would continue to play central roles in American politics. Speaker Clay served in the Cabinet under President John Quincy Adams as Secretary of State (1825-1829). Afterwards, he returned to the U.S. Senate. He had served briefly prior to his House service. This time, his tenure would span three decades (1831-1842, 1849-1852). Clay would also run for president three times; he ran in 1824, 1832, and 1844. After three terms in the House, Calhoun would later resign and become the Secretary of War (1817-1825) under President James Monroe. From there, he would serve as vice president of the United States (1825-1832). He would serve in the U.S. Senate for nearly twenty years until his death (1832-1843, 1845-1850). Calhoun even had a brief stint as Secretary of State (1844-1845) under President John Tyler.

Cheves succeeded Clay as Speaker of the House (1814-1815) and served as president of the Bank of the United States (1819-1822). Lowndes became the chair of the House Ways and Means Committee. Johnson was elected to the U.S. Senate (1819-1829) and then became vice president (1837-1841). Other members would go on to serve in the U.S. Senate (Grundy, Troup), serve as governors of their states (Troup, Williams), or serve in a president's cabinet (Grundy,

Porter). Harper was the only member whose career came to a quick end. He lost re-election in 1812 and then died four years after.

The War of 1812 was not “Mr. Madison’s War,” for it involved more than the president and his administration. It was a congressional war, a Democratic-Republican partisan war as well. The fate of the Federalists would be much different than the War Hawk-led Democratic-Republican Party. The country would ultimately reward the Democratic Republicans with even greater electoral success for standing up to the British and defending American rights in the Second War for Independence. In years to come, because of their solid and persistent opposition to the war, the Federalist Party would suffer politically. In the 1816 presidential election, for instance, the Federalists won only three states, Delaware, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. These were states that were solidly against the war with Britain. In congressional contests, Federalist numbers steadily dwindled. By the end of the 1810s, the party ceased to exist as a viable political entity. In 1820, it failed to produce nominees for president and vice president, and it held less than 20 percent of the seats in Congress.

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