

## Thomas Jefferson during the War of 1812

Often called the Second American Revolution or “Mr. Madison’s War,” the War of 1812 could just as easily be termed Mr. Jefferson’s War. As the third President, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826) attempted to protect and defend American sovereignty and commerce against Europe’s two major powers, Britain and France. Jefferson struggled to maintain neutrality between the new nation and Europe’s bullies, although he viewed the British as the greater threat. His economic and diplomatic policies were aimed at the protection of American interests, but when Jefferson left office his strategies proved a failure—and one result was the declaration of war against the British on 18 June 1812.

The causes of the war were the same issues Jefferson dealt with as President—trade restrictions stemming from the Napoleonic Wars, impressments, British support of Native Americans in the way of American expansion, and British insults to America’s national honor. Jefferson’s efforts to resolve these concerns failed—but as President he did outline a defense plan to include gunboats, a six-frigate Navy, building fortified seaports, and reorganized state militias. Wanting to curtail expenses and avoid a larger peacetime army, Congress battled the executive at every step. Appropriations for fifty gunboats were approved as was a nominal sum for fortifications along the sea coast, but Jefferson achieved little else in the way of defenses. The *Chesapeake-Leopold* affair (22 June 1807) brought tensions to a head and energized the nation for war, but with a small army the United States was in no position to battle the British and the Royal Navy. Jefferson attempted negotiation with passage of the Embargo of 1801, but it too was a failure. He left office in early 1809 and returned to his Virginia home at Monticello, but he still felt war was the only answer to America’s long-term problems with Britain.

When President Jefferson retired he instructed his friend Samuel Harrison Smith and *National Intelligencer* publisher to print a circular stating his (Jefferson’s) intent never to interfere with the new administration or to seek appointments for friends or family. He failed to abide by his intentions in regard to the War of 1812. Jefferson did write to Madison on occasion—and President Madison wrote back—but Jefferson was in regular contact with Secretary of State and fellow Virginian James Monroe, especially in relation to military and naval affairs. His letters showed insight and common sense yet were realistic. Jefferson hoped Monroe would in turn influence Madison’s war planning. In 1813 Jefferson shared his plan for financing the war through taxes and borrowing with Monroe and House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee chair John W. Eppes, his (Jefferson’s) son-in-law. There were other times when he solicited appointments for relatives and recommended others to administrative officials. Jefferson took great pride that many from his family did serve in the war.

The former President followed the war closely through news accounts and letters. In August 1812 Jefferson predicted the early fall of Canada simply by marching north to Quebec, followed by attacking Halifax and eliminating British presence in North America, a view shared by many Americans. He particularly followed the exploits of what he called “our little navy” in numerous letters, taking great pride in the war at sea and on the Great Lakes. Jefferson wrote to his old associate the Marquis de Lafayette that the British dare not allow their frigates to cruise alone, such was the equality and even superiority of American naval forces. Jefferson also shared in the successes of the American army but grew more frustrated with American ground

forces the longer the war lasted. His support of the war with Britain was unqualified and unreserved. During his administration Jefferson claimed the British had taken a thousand ships and impressed six thousand American seamen and his frustrations in his ability to address these issues were evident in his writings during the three years of conflict. Nowhere is his support of American forces more evident than in a letter he penned just months after the war began, declaring “the sword once drawn, full justice must be done.” Jefferson’s support of the war with Britain was unqualified and unreserved.

But he also expressed disappointments in actions such as the late summer invasion of Canada from Detroit and the surrender of the American army under William Hull, whom Jefferson had appointed governor of the Michigan Territory in 1805. Jefferson wanted Hull charged for treason. Jefferson frequently wrote Madison criticizing other officers such as generals Stephen Van Rensselaer, Alexander Smyth, and Henry Dearborn, lamenting that troops were lost as fast as they were raised. Likewise the retired President and Monroe communicated about the replacement of Secretary of War William Eustis—John Armstrong was named to the post in early 1813.

During the latter stages of the war Jefferson continued to press Eppes, Monroe, and others about financing the military and navy. It was during this period that Jefferson renewed his near fractured friendship with fellow founder John Adams, Jefferson’s predecessor as President under whom the Virginian served as Vice-President. But Jefferson and Adams became estranged after Jefferson’s 1800 election win and only after 1812 would the two renew a warm friendship and correspondence—thirteen letters exchanged in 1812, thirty five in 1813-- and remained a steady communication for the rest of their lives. Jefferson showered praise on Adams for his (Adams’s) role in the evolution of the American Navy and shared his ideas on paying for the war. Jefferson favored an issuance of treasury notes to finance the military and taxes to pay the interest. Always present was Jefferson’s obsession with avoiding a long-term national debt—a belief he advocated as early as the American Revolution, and one of the issues that prompted his letters to Madison. Jefferson did not want to leave obligations to future generations and proposed interest and loans must be met within fifteen years. He lacked trust in both the recently expired First Bank of the United States (1811) and state banks.

Jefferson and his lands suffered during the war. A drought in the summer of 1813 forced him to borrow funds. On his corn product Jefferson wrote his brother that the yield was about thirty barrels, far short of an expected seven to eight hundred, the result of the worst drought in forty years. In 1814 he experienced both a falling wheat market and a weak crop. At Monticello Jefferson had briefly experimented with nail production but a shortage of iron brought an abrupt end to his plans. At home he oversaw the construction of a gristmill, crude cloth manufacture, and experimented with raising sheep. His ventures into household manufactures proved beneficial to Jefferson’s own properties.

But Jefferson also learned of the fall of Washington (August 1814), the defense of Baltimore led in part by his old friend Samuel Smith (September 1814), and threat to Richmond, all of which caused him serious concern. He reacted in disbelief when the British burned the capitol at Washington, feeling such an act was beneath the civility of war and was quick to share his condemnation with friends and others. Jefferson was indifferent to the American victory at

New Orleans and disappointed in terms reached at Ghent. He felt the treaty did not address the issue of impressment which he considered a major cause of the war. As the war ended Jefferson was nevertheless optimistic and concluded that if the conflict had continued American forces could have taken Quebec and Halifax. To Jefferson, not losing the conflict was the greatest concession America had gained, but he was greatly disappointed in the “status quo ante-bellum” end of the war.

Toward the end of the War of 1812 Jefferson the president morphed into Jefferson the educator, as he continued planning for the University of Virginia—what Jefferson felt was one of his three greatest achievements. Jefferson envisioned such an institution early in his first presidency but by 1814 his creative mind was fully engaged with plans for the school. Breaking from the traditional educational paths—religion, law, and medicine—Jefferson’s university would teach botany, architecture, philosophy, and political science and other disciplines. The institution was to be separated from any church and no religion was to be taught. The central focus instead of a church would be a library, open to all students, and professors would virtually live among students. Visitors to the University of Virginia today can see first-hand the fruits of the educational planning Jefferson did during the war. The school opened in 1819. Jefferson felt so strongly about books as essential to learning that he sold his considerable personal collection to the Congress after the British burned much of Washington, thus becoming the “founder” of one of the great (if not the greatest) libraries of the modern world. Through letters, scientific farming and extensive agricultural record keeping, and planning for his university, Jefferson spent the years from 1812 to 1815 much as he had spent his entire life—in service to his country and his state.

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#### FURTHER READING:

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