

5 The War of 1812

Section Focus

Key Terms War of 1812 ■ impressment ■ Embargo Act of 1807 ■ Non-Intercourse Act ■ War Hawk ■ Battle of New Orleans ■ Treaty of Ghent ■ secession ■ Hartford Convention

Main Idea The clamor of westerners pushed the country into war with Britain in 1812. Although the war did little to settle issues, the United States once again stood up to the British empire.

Objectives As you read, look for answers to these questions:

1. What events led to war between the United States and Britain?
2. What was the outcome of the war with Britain?
3. Why were Americans divided over the war?

It ofttimes has been told, that the British
seamen bold
Could flog the tars of France so neat and
handy, O;
But they never met their match till the
Yankees did them catch,
O the Yankee boys for fighting are the
dandy, O!

This popular song of 1812 conveys the feisty spirit of many Americans as they again entered a war with Britain, the **War of 1812**.

DRIFTING TOWARD WAR

The resentments that led to the War of 1812 had started years earlier, on the high seas. In 1803 France and Britain once again went to war. Each tried to strangle the other's economy by depriving it of food and supplies. Since the United States traded with France and Britain, American ships and cargoes headed for both countries were seized.

At this time Great Britain also stepped up its hated policy of boarding American ships to look for navy deserters. To maintain a supply of sailors for its navy, Britain captured not only deserters but also American citizens. This kidnapping of Americans, known as **impressment**, enraged the American people.

At first the United States tried without success to assert its rights as a neutral country. Frustrated, Jefferson decided the thing to do was to

quit trading altogether with the outside world. At his urging, Congress passed the **Embargo Act of 1807**, forbidding ships to leave the United States for foreign ports. The act was folly, particularly for a nation whose wealth was tied to commerce and whose income depended on import duties.

The embargo became an issue in the election of 1808. Jefferson refused to run again, passing the Republican torch to his old friend James Madison. Madison won, but it was clear that the embargo had cost the Republicans support. As President, therefore, Madison tried a new ploy. The embargo was replaced with the **Non-Intercourse Act**, which forbade trade only with France and Britain. But like the embargo, this move only harmed American businesses. Smugglers made a fortune breaking the law, while Britain and France proved that they could do without American goods. Meanwhile the American temper was becoming more warlike, especially toward Great Britain.

WAR HAWKS OF THE WEST

The strongest cries for war came from the West. Westerners wanted land, and therefore they were anti-Indian, anti-British, and anti-Spanish.

In the Northwest Territory trouble with the Indians was growing. Young Indian warriors resented the treaties that obliged them to give up large parcels of land. One of those who hated the creeping invasion of Indian lands was Tecumseh (teh-KUHM-sah). To understand white people better, Tecumseh learned English and read the Bible,

Shakespeare, and history books. From his reading, he concluded that the Indians had to do what white Americans had done: unite.

Tecumseh traveled from the Gulf Coast to the Great Lakes urging the Indians to form a confederation. But before the confederation could be achieved, fighting broke out along the frontier. William Henry Harrison, governor of the Indiana Territory, defeated the Indians in a skirmish fought near Tippecanoe Creek in 1811. Harrison burned Tecumseh's village to the ground.

Harrison and others blamed the British for helping Tecumseh and encouraging the warfare. Anti-British feelings were intense, and western leaders such as Henry Clay of Kentucky called for war. Those westerners clamoring for war were dubbed **War Hawks**. Not only did they want British aid to

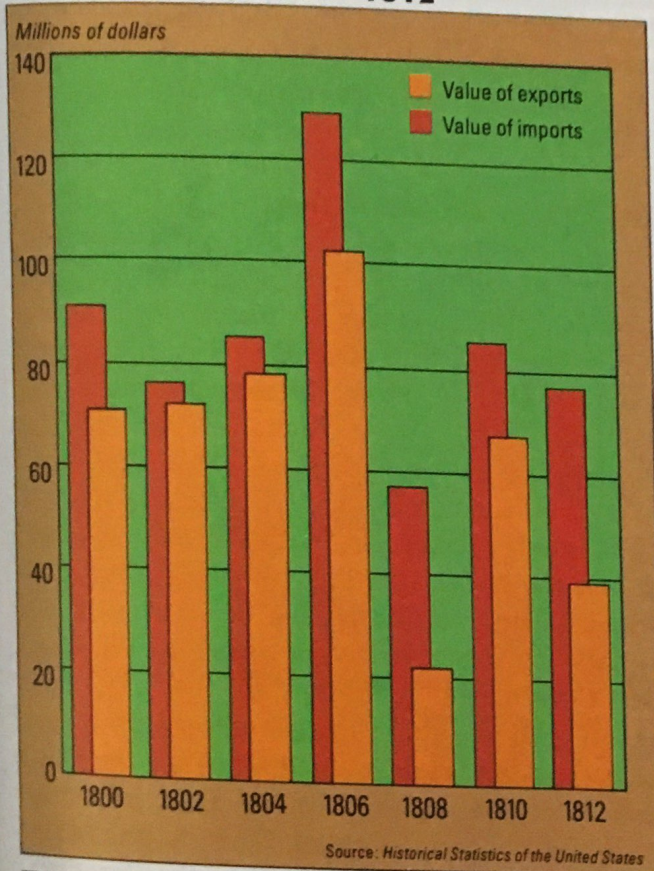
the Indians stopped, they wanted the British out of Canada altogether. "I am not for stopping at Quebec," said Clay, "but would take the whole continent."

"I am not for stopping at Quebec, but would take the whole continent."

—Henry Clay, 1810

The "whole continent" also included East and West Florida, ruled by Spain. The Floridas had become a haven for pirates, runaway slaves, white renegades, and Indians. Spain's control of river access to the Gulf of Mexico made slaveholders and pioneers alike seek American conquest of Florida.

FOREIGN TRADE, 1800–1812



GRAPH SKILLS

This bar graph shows the value of American imports and exports from 1800 to 1812. Which were greater during the period shown, imports or exports? What was the value of American exports in 1806? By how much did exports decrease between 1806 and 1808? **CRITICAL THINKING** What caused the drop in exports?

WAR IS DECLARED

Urged on by the War Hawks, Congress declared war on Britain on June 18, 1812. Among the main grievances cited were (1) the impressment of American sailors, (2) violations of American rights at sea, and (3) the British incitement of the Indians. Had communications been faster, war might have been avoided. Just two days earlier, deciding that they indeed needed American trade, the British repealed the policies Americans found so offensive.

The United States could have backed out of the war, but Madison was re-elected in 1812 on a promise to proceed with the fighting. In that election the influence of the West was decisive. And the war that followed was more of a war to meet western goals than one to defend the rights of a neutral nation.

THE WAR'S FIRST PHASE

The war had two phases. In the first phase, from 1812 to 1814, Britain threw most of its resources into the war against Napoleon in Europe. Therefore its North American strategy was to defend Canada from American attacks, blockade United States ports, and conduct hit-and-run raids along the coast.

American efforts to conquer Canada had little success in this first phase of the war. The Ameri-



THE PRESIDENTS



James Madison

1809–1817

4th President, Democratic-Republican

- Born March 16, 1751, in Virginia
- Married Dorothea “Dolley” Todd in 1794; no children
- Member of Virginia legislature; delegate to the Constitutional Convention; author of many of *The Federalist* essays; Secretary of State
- Lived in Virginia when elected President
- Vice Presidents: George Clinton; Elbridge Gerry
- Died June 28, 1836, in Virginia
- Key events while in office: War of 1812; “The Star-Spangled Banner” written; Treaty of Ghent; Battle of New Orleans; Louisiana and Indiana became states

can army consisted of fewer than 7,000 men at the war’s start and suffered from inept leadership. State militias provided important help, but only for defense. On two occasions, American troops invaded Canada, only to be forced to withdraw when the militiamen refused to accompany them across state lines! Another invasion attempt failed equally miserably: the British threw back the Americans and captured Detroit to boot. With the help of Tecumseh and his Indian army the British then attacked American settlements in the Northwest Territory.

The performance of their navy, on the other hand, gave Americans something to cheer about. The frigates *Constitution*, *United States*, and *President* won stirring victories on the high seas. But the most important naval victory took place in

September 1813, when Captain Oliver Hazard Perry engaged a British fleet on Lake Erie. Perry won the battle. “We have met the enemy, and they are ours,” he reported.

“We have met the enemy, and they are ours.”

—*Oliver Hazard Perry, 1813*

When William Henry Harrison, victor over the Indians at Tippecanoe, heard about Perry’s victory, he made his move. Harrison ferried his army across Lake Erie to Detroit. By the time Harrison arrived, the British had retreated into Canada. Harrison followed, defeating the British at the Battle of the Thames in October 1813. One of the battle casualties was Tecumseh, whose death ended the dream of an Indian confederation. With Tecumseh dead and the British in retreat, the Northwest Territory was once again secure.

THE WAR’S SECOND PHASE

The second phase of the war began with the British victory over Napoleon in April 1814. Peace in Europe allowed the British to turn their full attention to the Americans. The new British strategy was to split the United States by pushing south from Canada and north from New Orleans. To keep the Americans off balance, the British kept up their hit-and-run attacks on American ports.

The most spectacular of these attacks came against the nation’s capital. In August 1814, the British sailed into Chesapeake Bay and overpowered the few American troops defending Washington. Government officials fled the city, and according to one story, British officers ate a dinner laid out for President Madison. Then the British torched the city’s public buildings, including the White House and Capitol. (This act was in retaliation for an American attack on the Canadian city of York, in which the Americans burned several government buildings.) Fortunately, before the British arrived Dolley Madison had rescued her husband’s papers and a famous painting of George Washington.

THE WAR OF 1812



MAP SKILLS

The belt below, given by Tecumseh to the British, symbolizes Britain's alliance with the Indians, which was one cause of the War of 1812. What American victory prevented the British from invading the northeastern United States? **CRITICAL THINKING** How did America's decision to go to war in 1812 show the influence of regional interests on foreign policy?



This illustration shows British troops putting the torch to buildings in Washington in 1814. **HISTORY** What motivated the British to burn public buildings in Washington?



The British then turned their attention to the nearby city of Baltimore. But the attack on Baltimore failed when Fort McHenry held out in spite of heavy bombardment. A notable result of that attack was the writing of our national anthem. Held prisoner by the British, Francis Scott Key watched the all-night battle and then wrote “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

★ Historical Documents

For the text of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” see page R18 of this book.



BIOGRAPHY

DOLLEY MADISON (1768–1849) hosted many White House functions while her husband, James Madison, served as Secretary of State under Thomas Jefferson, a widower. As the British drew near Washington during the War of 1812, Dolley Madison stayed at the White House, rescuing state papers and George Washington’s portrait. When her husband became President, she continued the role of First Lady, tactfully overseeing gatherings of politicians and diplomats.

Meanwhile, the British mounted two full-scale invasions of American territory. In September 1814 the British sent a force from Canada into Lake Champlain, planning to drive south and cut New England off from the rest of the country. American ships defeated the British at the Battle of Lake Champlain, forcing the British to withdraw. Then the British moved on New Orleans. By December 1814 dozens of ships carrying 7,500 troops were approaching Louisiana. Waiting for them was Andrew Jackson.

Lean and tough, Jackson was a self-made man of the frontier. He had proven his military leadership earlier that year by defeating the Creek Indians, who had sided with the British, at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend in Alabama. Now, with an army of frontier militiamen he hastened to defend New Orleans. The resulting **Battle of New Orleans** was a great victory for Jackson. American casualties were 21; the British about 2,030.

The Battle of New Orleans made Jackson a hero of the West. Yet it had not been necessary. Neither side at New Orleans knew that a peace treaty, the **Treaty of Ghent**, had been signed before the battle was fought. The treaty reflected the lack of a clear winner in the war. No territory changed hands. Border and trade disputes that had helped spark the war were resolved in later talks.

STATES' RIGHTS IN NEW ENGLAND

Jackson's victory at New Orleans and the peace treaty did have important effects on developments within the United States. One effect was to undermine a states' rights movement then brewing in New England.

New England merchants and shippers had bitterly opposed the War of 1812, which they called "Mr. Madison's war." While New Englanders were the ones hurt by British policies such as impressment, they feared that a cutoff of trade with Britain would hurt them even more. To New Englanders, the war was further proof that the Republicans were willing to destroy trade in favor of the agricultural interests of the West and South. Resentments festered as the war went on. Some New Englanders even talked of **secession** (withdrawing from the Union) and a separate peace with Britain.

Peace seemed far away when Massachusetts issued a call to neighboring states to meet at Hartford, Connecticut. At the **Hartford Convention** in December 1814, Federalist moderates steered the talk away from secession and toward proposals for new constitutional amendments. The proposed amendments would have limited the power of Congress to impose embargoes, restrict commerce, make war, or admit new states. To curtail the power of the South, the convention wanted to set aside the Three-Fifths Compromise, which included slaves as part of a state's population (page 120). Following the lead of the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions of 1798–1799 (page 177), the convention also asserted that the states had the right to repeal acts of Congress.

The convention appointed three people to carry its recommendations to President Madison. But when they arrived in Washington, the city had just learned of Jackson's victory at New Orleans and the signing of a peace treaty. This news touched off a wild celebration in the capital, and the Federalist envoys quietly slipped out of town. Little more was heard from New England on the subject of states' rights. And not much more was heard from the Federalist Party, which was charged with treason by political opponents because of the ill-timed meeting at Hartford.

The Federalists were also victims of a changing mood in the country. The war, though not quite a military victory, gave Americans a new feeling of confidence and assertiveness. You will read about this new mood in the next chapter.

SECTION REVIEW

- 1. KEY TERMS** War of 1812, impressment, Embargo Act of 1807, Non-Intercourse Act, War Hawk, Battle of New Orleans, Treaty of Ghent, secession, Hartford Convention
- 2. PEOPLE** James Madison, Tecumseh, William Henry Harrison, Dolley Madison, Andrew Jackson
- 3. COMPREHENSION** Why did westerners insist on a war with Britain?
- 4. COMPREHENSION** What distinguished each phase of the War of 1812?
- 5. CRITICAL THINKING** The War of 1812 has been called "the unnecessary war." Do you agree or disagree? Explain.

CHAPTER 6 TIMELINE

