
Background Information

The War of 1812 had been brewing for many years, originating with conflicts with Great Britain over trade restrictions and the impressment of American sailors. Britain, already in a war with Napoleon, seemed reluctant to open up a new front in North America. Even after the United States forbade all trade with Britain and opened up trade with France, Britain refrained from declaring war on the United States. To the contrary, Britain removed its trade restrictions on the United States on June 16, 1812, two days before the United States declared war on Britain. Unfortunately, due to a lack of swift communication, Congress declared war on June 18 before receiving word of Britain's action.

Much discussion over the reasons for this declaration of war has centered on the issues of the freedom of the seas and the impressment of American sailors. These reasons alone, however, do not explain the American insistence on war in the face of British relaxation of tensions. Other factors seemed to be at work. In addition, many members of Congress from the Northeast opposed the war, while members from the South and the West endorsed it.

Other reasons for a U.S. declaration of war had to do with the needs and desires of Americans in these sections of the country. The reasons can be summarized as:

- More farming lands north into Canada and south into the Spanish Floridas were desired. War with Britain could result in the annexation of these areas.
- There was an emergence of national pride in the growing strength of the new country. The impressment of American sailors was an injury to U.S. pride that many Americans felt should no longer be endured.



- Indian relations in the Northwest Territory were being aggravated by British support for Tecumseh's Indian Confederation. Settlers demanded war with Britain in order to stop Indian attacks and harassment.

- The demands and speeches of the "War Hawks" in Congress created a war spirit. Men from western states, such as Henry Clay of Kentucky, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, and Felix Grundy of Tennessee, incited a warlike atmosphere with many inflammatory remarks.



These additional justifications for war with Britain created an almost irreversible trend towards war. Because of the emotional rhetoric and opposition from some quarters, a great deal of propaganda was used by many Americans to further their claims.

Those opposed to the war lived primarily in the New England area and were for the most part associated with the Federalist party. Their feelings were so strong that they proposed rather drastic measures to prevent war. These measures ultimately discredited the Federalist party in the American political scene.

Propaganda: Speeches

Read this excerpt of a speech given to Congress by Henry Clay of Kentucky on February 22, 1810, and then complete the activity that follows.

"No man in the nation wants peace more than I. But I prefer the troubled ocean of war, with all its disasters and desolation, to the calm decaying pool of dishonorable peace

Britain stands out in her outrage on us, by her violation of the sacred personal rights of American freemen, in the arbitrary and lawless imprisonment of our seamen

It is said, however, that it is hopeless to go to war with Great Britain. If we go to war, we are to estimate not only the benefit to be gained for ourselves, but the injury done to the enemy. The conquest of Canada is in your power. I trust I shall not be thought to be bold when I state that I truly believe that the militia of Kentucky are alone competent to place Montreal and Upper Canada at your feet Is it nothing to us to put out the torch that lights up Indian warfare? Is it nothing to gain the entire fur trade connected with Canada?

The withered arm and wrinkled brow of the illustrious founders of our freedom are sad signs that they will shortly be removed from us We shall want the presence and living example of a new race of heroes to supply their places, and to encourage us to preserve what they achieved."



Propaganda: Speeches

Read this excerpt from President Madison's request to Congress for a declaration of war on June 1, 1812, and answer the questions that follow.

"It has become certain that Great Britain intends to destroy the trade of the U.S. This has resulted not because the U.S. interfered with the wartime rights of Great Britain, not because it supplied the wants of Britain's enemies, but because the U.S. is in the way of the monopoly which Britain wants for its own trade and navigation.



In reviewing the conduct of Great Britain toward the U.S., our attention is necessarily drawn to the warfare just started by the Indians on one of our extensive frontiers. In this warfare, both women and children are killed and the Indians use brutal fighting methods. It is difficult to account for the activity among tribes in constant communication with British traders and garrisons without connecting their hostility with that influence.

We see, in essence, on the side of Great Britain, a state of war against the U.S., and on the side of the U.S. a state of peace toward Great Britain.

Whether the U.S. shall continue not to do anything about these accumulating wrongs or use of force in defense of its national rights is a solemn question which the Constitution wisely leaves to the legislative branch of the government. In recommending it to their early consideration, I am sure that the decision will be worthy of the enlightened and patriotic councils of a virtuous and powerful nation."

Propaganda: Editorials

Not all Americans supported the war. Federalists in New England opposed the war even to the point of suggesting secession from the Union. Read this editorial from a Boston newspaper printed in 1813 and answer the questions that follow.

"The feeling is growing by the hour that we are in a condition no better in relation to the South than that of a conquered people. We have been forced, without the least necessity, to give up our habits, occupations, means of happiness, and means of support. We are plunged into a war without feeling that there has been sufficient cause for it. We are obliged to fight the battles of a conspiracy which, while pretending to defend republican equality, aims at trampling into the dust the weight, influence, and power of trade.



We, whose ships were the training ground of sailors, are insulted with the pretense of a devotion to sailors' rights by those whose region knows nothing of navigation beyond the size of a ferryboat or an Indian canoe. We have no interest in fighting this sort of war, at this time and under these circumstances, at the command of Virginia.

The consequences must be either that the southern states must drag the northern states farther into the war or we must drag them out of it, or the union of our nation will break apart. We must no longer listen to those foolish outcries against a separation of the states. It is an event we do not desire. But the states are separated in fact when one section continues in actions fatal to the interests and opposed to the opinions of another section because of a geographical majority."