Once he was elected president, Thomas Jefferson could finally put into practice the ideas he had defended in 1790 concerning the North African regencies. He found the prevailing tribute system humiliating, and he decided to discontinue it, ordering the American navy, which had proven itself against the French during the quasi war, to use force to settle relations with the North African countries. As it turned out, the American navy effectively protected the new nation’s trade in 1801 and 1802. But at the end of 1803 the famous Philadelphia episode occurred: this ship, which was one of the most handsome frigates of the American fleet, ran aground in the Tripoli harbor; its crew was captured, and a few days later, the Philadelphia was refloated by the Tripolitans, who proudly took possession of the ship. It was then that one of the heroic deeds in the history of the American navy took place: a group of Americans, led by Lieutenant Stephen Decatur, managed to recapture the frigate in the very harbor of Tripoli, right under the guards’ nose; as they could not bring it back, they burned it, without losing a single man. After a four-year blockade and an attempted coup plotted by the former American consul in Tunis, William Eaton, the pasha of Tripoli finally gave in: in 1805, the United States obtained a treaty in which there was no mention of tribute. Thus, the United States paved the way for “gunboat diplomacy” in relations with these small countries, a policy that France was to imitate successfully from 1830 on.

American newspapers printed in detail the news of the loss of the Philadelphia and the account of Decatur’s bold raid. When word got out about the loss of the frigate, the Republican Aurora, which supported the government, appealed to the national feeling of Americans: “The loss of this vessel is unquestionably a real calamity, and we are fully confident there is not a man
in the union . . . who does not sensibly feel for the situation of his fellow-citizens [the imprisoned sailors].” When Decatur’s action became known, the newspaper insisted on its significance: “The importance of this bold and intrepid enterprise to the commerce of America must be acknowledged very great; but what affords the highest satisfaction is, that we have lost in this action, not a single officer or private.”5 According to the Aurora, this show of American bravery turned Tripoli into “a scene of terror and confusion” and demonstrated the superiority of the new nation over the Barbary Coast regencies; the newspaper added that it filled other countries’ navies with admiration. Admiral Nelson praised Decatur’s raid as “the most bold and daring act of the age.” The burning of the Philadelphia was celebrated in engravings, which helped create a naval tradition in the American imagination.7 The various components of a mature nationalism now fell into place; this was truly a “secondary national feeling,”8 which was soon to help America acquire full status as a nation on the international scene, through the use of military force if necessary. In 1807, when the confrontation with England took a dramatic turn, Americans would call up the spirit of Decatur and his superior, Preble: “The Navy—May our Commodores be Prebles—and our Captains Decatur.”9

In 1804, however, Decatur’s feat flattered American pride, but it did not cause loud displays of patriotism. When the Philadelphia was captured, there were no crowds marching down the streets; when Decatur’s raid was announced, the newspapers did not fill up with emotional addresses from citizens; and in the spring of 1804 Stephen Decatur was not acclaimed as a national hero. The greatness of the nation, its identity, and its status among the nations of the world did not depend on that faraway episode. In 1804 American citizens identified more with the conquest of the continent than with military deeds, however brilliant, that were accomplished in theaters of operation traditionally reserved for European powers.

After the war with Tripoli was over, Jefferson considerably reduced the force of the American navy, replacing the frigates that were capable of carrying war far and wide with strictly defensive gunboats—mere “toys”10 about fifty feet long and armed with only one cannon. American neutrality and pacifism with regard to Europe were supposed to allow the United States to develop within its own sphere. Jefferson’s decisions echoed the isolationist principles he had articulated in his 1801 inaugural address; they also reflected the president’s mistrust of professional armies, which went back to the revolutionary years, and his preference for militias and such popular armies. That suspicion was typical of most men of his generation, and was apparent in the Constitution, especially in Article I, Section 8, which made Congress responsible for revising the sums appropriated for the army every other year, as well as in the Second and Third Amendments, which gave special rights to the soldier-citizen and institutionalized the distrust of a professional army. Jefferson’s own feelings in the
matter, however, were reinforced by Napoleon's accession to power in France: the prospect of the republic being overthrown by a military dictator was exactly what he wanted to avoid in America.  

Still, continental expansion and economic prosperity were not yet sufficient to give shape to American identity. Before setting out for the riches of the West, the American nation needed to have its new identity recognized by the former parent country. While the American public had been relatively unmoved by the performance of its navy in Tripoli harbor in 1803, it was a different story in 1807 after another frigate, the *Chesapeake*, fell prey to an attack by a British warship, the *Leopard*. Although it was shocking between two countries at peace—several American sailors were killed—the attack was not without some justification. Indeed, the commander of the British ship was trying to recover some deserters who had boarded the *Chesapeake* during a stopover in the United States. Enjoined to return the men, who claimed to be American citizens, the *Chesapeake*'s commander chose an armed confrontation over a humiliating submission. It was perfectly logical, then, that American public opinion would go wild over the event. In seeking to capture American citizens, the British navy displayed contempt for American citizenship. Wasn't England attempting to blacken something that, since 1798 and even more so since 1803, had become a symbol of American power abroad? In this case, the issue was not minor: even though the new nation was rich and ambitious, and even though it had already wrought out the main features of its identity, it could not reach maturity without obtaining recognition from the great power from which it had wrested its independence.

“War in Disguise” and the Rise of American Nationalism

In the course of the summer of 1805, the British navy seized a number of American merchant ships. An action of that dimension had not been seen since the 1793 Orders in Council, when the British had intended to break up U.S. commerce with France and its colonies on the basis of the Rule of 1756. At the time, in January 1794, more flexible orders had been forwarded to British navy officers, instructing them to seize only ships that carried goods originating in the French Caribbean and going directly from there to Europe. During the discussion of Jay's Treaty, the U.S. Senate had refused to ratify Article XII, which would have limited American commerce to the British West Indies. After the treaty was ratified, the 1794 ordinance was put back in effect in 1798.

It was this ordinance that allowed the United States to take over and turn to their profit the trade of the European nations, by substituting for the national freighters. U.S. ships could not make a straight run to Europe from the French or Spanish colonies, but they could stop over in the United States, unload, reload,
and start again, which did not bother them or take them out of their way very much. In fact, when stopping over at an American port instead of unloading their cargo, the captains of U.S. ships soon adopted the simpler procedure of destroying their former documents, getting new ones, and paying minimal fees. This practice of the “broken voyage” was also made legal in 1800 by the decision of a British judge, Sir William Scott. Although it was temporarily stopped by the Peace of Amiens, the reexport trade continued to develop unfettered from 1800 to 1805, growing from forty million to sixty million dollars.

In 1805, however, the British navy suddenly went back to seizing American ships that were engaged in the reexport trade, marking the end of this period of “indulgence,” as James Stephen—one of its fiercest critics—called it. On May 22, 1805, Judge Grant ruled in the case of the Essex that he could not find the slightest evidence of the merchandise being actually imported into the United States. Insofar as the fees paid upon unloading in the United States had been refunded (a practice that had become frequent), and as both ship and cargo had remained the same, the judge found that the voyage had not actually been broken, and therefore the procedure was a fraud, consisting of fake importation into the United States and real, direct importation from one colony to its parent country, the latter being an enemy of England. As a result, it was now up to ship captains to prove that their voyage had effectively been broken, and from this point on the reexport trade was to be a risky business.

This action, which shook the foundations of U.S. economic growth in the postrevolutionary period, had been preceded in the early 1800s by a gradual cooling of Anglo-American relations. In 1803, upon assuming his position in Washington, D.C., the new British ambassador, Anthony Merry, had been unable to adapt to the informal atmosphere of American political life. What was even worse, he had made contact with opponents of the Republican government, such as Aaron Burr and pro-secession Federalists, and this certainly did not ingratiate him with the president and his secretary of state.

In March 1804 James Monroe, who had taken Rufus King’s place in London in 1803, had started to complain about the unfriendly attitude of the British officials he was dealing with, and more generally of British political circles; this attitude he assigned to “ancient feelings excited at present by light causes.” These “light causes” were none other than the quarrels over etiquette that Anthony Merry had picked against Jefferson in Washington; but the “ancient feelings” referred to the alleged bitterness of the former colonizing power toward the United States. Monroe thought it was also possible that the British had taken offense at the Louisiana Purchase and the restoration of Franco-American relations. The fundamental reason for British hostility, he believed, was jealousy: “Many circumstances have tended to convince me that they entertain very false impressions with respect to our growth and that they view the rapid advancement we have made and are making with no very favorable eye.
They seem to consider our prosperity not simply as a reproach to them, but as impairing or detracting from theirs.” Monroe seemed also to think that the British sought to humiliate the United States and to treat them as a second-class power: “In respect to the ministers of other powers we appear to hold the lowest grade; in a diplomatick dinner at Lord Hawkesbury’s precedence was given, and apparently by design, to all the other ministers, and on more occasions than one to the minister of Portugal, evidently by design.”

In Monroe’s view, the former mother country was now trying to smother the nation it had given birth to. The issue of American sovereignty, and Great Britain’s respect of it, had come to the fore of U.S. current affairs in course of the summer of 1804. Captain Bradley, aboard the British warship *Cambrian*, had inspected a number of American commercial ships in American waters to see if there were any of His Majesty’s subjects among the sailors. Bradley had made several American sailors come on board his ship in order to enlist them for the British Crown. As Jefferson had observed at the time, that kind of action threatened U.S. independence and sovereignty: “We cannot be respected by France as a neutral nation, nor by the world ourselves as an independent one, if we do not take effectual measures to support, at every risk, our authority in our own harbors.” But since at that time Jefferson was almost exclusively preoccupied with obtaining the Floridas, he paid little attention to the deterioration of relations between the United States and Great Britain. He chose instead to take an optimistic view of the situation—rather unjustifiably so—as when he heard about Pitt’s new cabinet in Great Britain: “The new administration in England is entirely cordial. There has never been a time when our flag was so little molested by them in the European seas, or irregularities there so readily and respectfully corrected. As the officers here [of the *Cambrian*] began their insults before the change [of cabinets], it is a proof it did not proceed from that change.” Even in his annual message of November 1804, Jefferson reaffirmed his trust in the British government: “[E]ven within our harbors and jurisdiction, infringements on the authority of the laws have been committed which have called for serious attention. The friendly conduct of the governments from whose officers and subjects these acts have proceeded, in other respects and in places more under their observation and control, gives us confidence that our representations on this subject will have been properly regarded.” At the same time, Monroe also showed renewed confidence in the British attitude regarding the American reexport trade.

Going back now to Judge Grant’s ruling of 1805, one can better understand American leaders’ surprise over that decision and the wave of seizures of U.S. ships that it triggered. Americans felt that their confidence had been betrayed, as the British government had not informed them of the decision. In addition, they found that this struck at the foundations of more than ten years of prosperity: upon the news of the seizings, insurance rates for American ships
quadrupled. The American leaders had not wanted, or been able, to prevent this turnabout; they found it all the more disquieting, since it was accompanied by the publication of a polemical work, more than two hundred pages long, and significantly entitled—probably at the behest of the Pitt cabinet—*War in Disguise; or, The Frauds of the Neutral Flags.* The author, James Stephen, called for the enforcement of the Rule of 1756, which had not been applied since 1794, and an end to the policy of indulgence toward neutral countries, whom he described as Napoleon’s hidden accomplices. Stephen proposed to show: “. . . in the encroachments and frauds of the neutral flags, a nursery, a refuge of the confederated navies; as well as the secret conduits of a large part of those imperial resources, the pernicious application of which to the restitution of his marine, the Usurper has lately boasted. I propose to show in them his best hopes in a naval war; as well as channels of a revenue, which sustains the ambition of France, and prolongs the miseries of Europe.” The book was supposed to be aimed at all neutral powers, but this posture soon revealed its true colors, as Stephen could not refrain from admitting that his attacks were mainly targeted at one neutral power, the United States, for having exploited its neutrality the most: “A new power had now arisen on the western shore of the Atlantic, whose position, and maritime spirit, were calculated to give new and vast importance to every question of neutral rights; especially in the American seas. The merchants of the United States, were the first, and by far the most enterprising adventurers in the new field that was opened to neutrals in the Antilles, and the ports of the French islands were speedily crowded with their vessels.”

As is indicated by Monroe’s dispatches of 1804, Americans were not willing to excuse a libel such as *War in Disguise* or the *Essex* ruling as resulting from Great Britain’s military troubles in 1805; they opted instead to interpret these events as signs of the former parent country’s jealousy. And indeed, in the years leading up to the War of 1812, there undoubtedly existed in Great Britain a form of resentment toward the former colonies. Still, the modern-day reader senses real distress in *War in Disguise.* When hostilities broke out again in 1803, the war between the British and the French was now total war, and in relations with the United States, Great Britain could no longer afford the conciliatory attitude that it had espoused since 1794. The year 1805 especially was a turning point in military operations: Nelson destroyed the French fleet at Trafalgar, but in December Napoleon defeated the Russians and Austrians at Austerlitz. Thus, England ruled over the seas, and France over the continent.

Americans, however, were too focused on their own prosperity to take into account the new situation in Great Britain, which reflected increasing danger. Eager to have the former parent country recognize their new strength, they discerned only envy and resentment in the ideas of James Stephen and the British cabinet. For Monroe, British jealousy called for a firm American reaction: “I
decided at once to push the business here in a manner to let the government see that we were not afraid of it.”31 In other words, it was time for the United States to show the former parent country that it was worthy of respect as a nation. U.S. honor was at stake, and also the future of the form of government which it had chosen after the Revolution, which it had identified itself with, and which now made up one of its most distinctive features in a world of monarchies and dictatorships. Continuing the debate Madison had opened in *The Federalist* no. 10, Monroe reckoned that a republic could and ought to show its resolution: “In all doubtful cases a bold and manly council ought to be preferred. It rallies the nation round us; keeps up its spirits; and proves at home and abroad that republicanism is not incompatible with decision.”32

This new spirit of decision quickly manifested itself in Madison’s *Examination of the British Doctrine . . .*, in which he countered Stephen’s arguments.33 Meanwhile, in London Monroe had to face a series of laws and decrees aimed at putting the Caribbean trade under the control of the British navy. He asked that the *Essex* ruling of May 22 be repealed, since as he told the Secretary of Foreign Affairs Lord Mulgrave, he regarded that decision as a hostile act. Having failed in that request, he commented: “Nothing is more true than that no accommodation will ever be granted us . . . which they can avoid.”34 His pessimism mounted when he found out that Captain Bradley, who had perpetrated the violation of American sovereignty in 1804, had been promoted, not punished as Jefferson assumed:

> It appeared also by your letters . . . that the President expected that this government would make such an example of the officers who had most signalized themselves, by their misconduct, as would serve as a warning to the commanders of the vessels, who may hereafter seek shelter or hospitality in our ports. This has not been done. On the contrary, I was informed . . . that Captain Bradley of the *Cambrian*, whose conduct had been most offensive, had been promoted immediately on his return to the command of a ship of the line. By that measure which prejudged the case the government seems to have adopted those acts of its officers as its own, and even to announce to all others that the commission of like aggressions within our jurisdiction would pave the way to their preferment.”35

At the same time, however, Jefferson was considering an alliance with Great Britain, which would allow the United States to obtain the Floridas in return for taking part in the hostilities. On October 11, 1805, he wrote: “The only questions which press on the Executive for decision are whether we shall enter into a provisional alliance with England to come into force only in the event that *during the present war* we become engaged in war with France.”36 But in his annual message of December 3, 1805, the American president took exception to the
new British stance on the reexport trade, albeit only after harshly criticizing Spanish privateers, whom he deemed more dangerous. In sum, a defensive kind of American nationalism clearly emerged after 1804; it was directed at the former colonizing power, which was perceived as hostile and bent on humiliating the new nation by denying its strength and prosperity. Insofar as the people were not yet really mobilized, this feeling was primarily expressed by American leaders, although they had to tone it down because of other more pressing foreign policy affairs.

The Monroe-Pinkney Treaty and the Revival of the Idea of Economic Retaliation

As we saw with the Cambrian episode of 1804, the Essex ruling, with its consequences for the American reexport trade, was not the only matter that poisoned Anglo-American relations after 1805: another issue was the impressment of American sailors by the British navy. Since the onset of the revolutionary wars, Great Britain had lost a large part of its roster to American ships—the owners offered higher wages and better working conditions—and also to the U.S. Navy, which needed more personnel to keep up with expansion. British sailors who landed in an American port when their ships put in would go and enroll on American ships. From the British wartime point of view, this constituted desertion and was not in any way compensated by American citizenship, which lenient naturalization laws made easy. In 1805, according to historian Bradford Perkins, more than half of the eleven thousand naturalized Americans who served in the American navy had been born in England.

As a result, the British navy had started back in the 1790s to search American ships for British subjects who should have been in combat. Such actions always constituted serious violations of American sovereignty: whether the abducted sailors had been born in Great Britain or the United States, they were, in any case, American citizens, and the American government owed them protection on that count. For the new nation, accepting the impressment of sailors amounted to admitting that it had no means of protecting its citizens and that it was still a second-class nation, bending under the yoke of the former parent country. The impressment of American sailors had thus become a major bone of contention between the two countries. When in London between 1796 and 1801, as the American minister plenipotentiary, Rufus King had devoted part of his time to this problem; similarly, James Monroe had not failed to raise the issue upon arriving in London.

In December 1803 Monroe transmitted a memorandum on this topic to the British government, which he expected to answer promptly. In 1804 he
broached the topic again, this time in connection with a planned treaty, since Jay’s Treaty was no longer valid (Jay’s Treaty had been set to expire two years after a peace agreement was signed between France and England). While British leaders seemed to want to renew the treaty, they clearly did not want to hear about the impressment issue. After returning from Spain in the summer of 1805, Monroe had to deal first and foremost with the new British doctrine that Judge Grant’s decision symbolized. In late 1805 new hope arose in the American diplomat’s heart: British military ambitions on the European continent were crushed at Austerlitz, and Charles Fox, a pacifist and moderate politician who had supported the cause of American independence during the Revolution, replaced Pitt as head of the British government. As Monroe observed: “[T]he prospect of a fortunate termination of the business is now as favorable as it can possibly be; . . . the crisis is essentially past: the ministry has completely failed in all its operations on the continent. The allies have been defeated, the coalition broken and the ministry itself subjected to the same fate. A new ministry is forming, the chief character of which is understood to be favorably disposed to the United States. . . .” Jefferson was of the same mind, except that he also counted on the new American spirit of determination: “With England I flatter myself our difficulties will be dissipated by the disasters of her allies, the change of her ministry, and the measures which Congress are likely to adopt to furnish motives for her becoming just to us.”

Congress did in fact react to British abuses by passing in the spring of 1806 a bill banning importation of British products. In view of the British cabinet’s favorable dispositions, this act was not immediately enforced, but it was typical of the kind of retaliation measures the Republicans wanted to use. Eager to resist Great Britain but without going to war, they wanted to put into practice the kind of economic retaliation that Madison had set forth in 1789, 1790, and 1794. The Aurora had not called for war after Judge Grant’s ruling in 1805; instead, it had given an optimistic presentation of all the other prospects for retaliation that the new nation had. In the October 16 issue, an “American gentleman” supposedly writing from England advocated “non-intercourse,” that is, the absence of trade relations: “We can certainly fight England better without guns, than any other nation can with, and perhaps we shall never have so good an opportunity as the present. It is acknowledged here by all parties, that their manufactories would be ruined, should such a thing take place in America; and if the English did not give up their pretensions thus to restrict us, in three months, I would be willing to forfeit all I have, the fourth month. . . .” In the same issue, an editorialist also pleaded in favor of economic retaliation and listed measures such as sequestration, non-importation, confiscation, and embargo as being more “rational” for the United States than traditional war: “Our mode of warfare, therefore, by calling in sequestration, non-importation, and in the dernier resort, confiscation as allies, is the most rational. . . . We
cannot meet her in a line of battle at sea—for her fleets cover it; we must therefore make war where we can, sequester, first; and if that does not procure justice, embargo; if that fails, confiscate...”46

Great Britain was mistress of the seas: it would therefore have been irrational to confront her on her own territory. Meanwhile, if the United States waged economic war, it could defeat Great Britain in a few months’ time. Such optimism and confidence in a favorable outcome of the conflict had been absent from the congressional debates back in 1789–94, when Madison had propounded similar ideas. In 1804 Madison’s ideas rallied many hopeful supporters, because the economic context of the new nation had evolved dramatically. The Republicans now felt they could rely on their country’s unequalled expansion and prosperity, and they no longer shied away from implementing ideas that had seemed dangerous to Congress ten years earlier, at a time when America was chiefly seeking to establish its economic development. In addition, the isolation of Great Britain and the state of wartime Europe were winning arguments: the Americans knew they were the principal buyers of British textile products and the suppliers of most of Manchester’s cotton.47 As the “American gentleman” explained, Great Britain was vulnerable to an economic war waged by the United States.

On April 25, 1806, the Leander, an British frigate that blocked the New York harbor and inspected every American ship in search of British sailors, shot at an American merchant ship and killed one crew member by the name of John Pierce. The New York crowds broke out into a violent reaction, as the Aurora reported: “This murderous act produced the utmost sensation in New York, and we hope it will excite equal sensation and abhorrence everywhere else. Immediately after the body of Mr. Pierce was landed, we learn that the populace carried it through the principal streets of the city, as a spectacle and as an evidence of British honor, justice, humanity and respect for America...”48 In spite of his trust in Charles Fox, Jefferson wished on this occasion, as George Washington had in 1794, to manifest the anger of the American people and the determination of their leaders by sending a special envoy to London. Thus, William Pinkney joined James Monroe; both were officially required to conclude a commercial treaty to replace Jay’s Treaty and to settle the issues arising from infringements on the rights of neutrals and British violations of American sovereignty. Charles Fox had already shown his conciliatory attitude: in May he had imposed by an Order in Council a blockade that amounted to restoring the American reexport trade with all its former advantages.

In the instructions Madison drafted for Monroe and Pinkney, two demands formed a nonnegotiable core, to be obtained at all costs: the end of the impressment of American sailors by the British navy, and the lifting of barriers to the reexport trade.49 On the strictly commercial items, the negotiations that continued into the fall of 1806 yielded some worthwhile concessions for the United States. According to the assessment by historian Donald Hickey:
All in all, the terms of the Monroe-Pinkney Treaty were quite favorable to the U.S., especially compared to those of the Jay Treaty. The U.S. gave up the right of commercial retaliation and the doctrine of free ships-free goods. It accepted greater restrictions on its trade with India. In exchange the U.S. received almost all the privileges and guarantees of the Jay Treaty and much more. The reexport trade was guaranteed, the nation's territorial waters were extended, a narrow definition of contraband was established, a more favorable structure of commercial duties was secured.  

The treaty was signed on December 31, 1806. Although Monroe had always pressed for a firm stance, he admitted his satisfaction, even without a settlement on the impressment issue. Yet as soon as Jefferson received the treaty and realized that it contained nothing about this issue, he dismissed it without even forwarding it to the Senate. For Donald Hickey, in hindsight this decision was unquestionably a mistake. In Hickey's view, there was another option besides those mentioned by Republican pamphleteers (submission, commercial sanctions, or war); in particular, the Monroe-Pinkney Treaty offered accommodation as an alternative. This treaty was indeed a compromise, as its authors readily acknowledged: "... as you readily believe [I have] done everything in my power to bring the negotiation to a satisfactory conclusion. I think it will be concluded in six weeks from this time, and on terms that our government and country will approve, not on every point, or such as they may desire, or perhaps expect; but on such as will essentially improve our situation, on several of the first importance, and injure it in none." The fact that it was a compromise was precisely what made the treaty unacceptable in the eyes of the American president, who even refused to submit it to the Senate. In the letter, it may have offered greater commercial advantages than Jay's Treaty of 1794, but as Bradford Perkins has pointed out, in spirit it more clearly implied American inferiority. In refusing to include a ban on the impressment of sailors in the treaty, Great Britain demonstrated, in American eyes, that it did not fully recognize the sovereignty of the new nation. Commercial advantages mattered little in the end: by 1806 the American republic was no longer the small peripheral power in quest of concessions that it had been in 1794; rather, it was the second trading nation in the world. What really mattered in the treaty, then, was not trade but the impressment of sailors; U.S. greatness and honor depended on it.

Americans felt that the hostile attitude of the British navy and government since 1805 proved that the former colonizing power did not accord the United States its true value. Instead, through a policy of smothering the U.S. economy and through isolated acts of humiliation that mounted to trampling on U.S. sovereignty, Great Britain seemed to avoid acknowledging the spectacular growth of the United States. Thus, there was nothing surprising about Jefferson's
rejection of the treaty in 1807, an action that signaled first and foremost a desire for recognition. The United States wanted to be regarded as an independent nation and to be treated by Great Britain with all the respect due to a great power that actually held the keys to the British economy, but the British accorded second place to those demands, after the necessities of war with France. Whereas the Republican leaders wanted to be considered equals, they felt that they were regarded as impatient children who could easily be tamed. At the beginning of the crisis in 1805, a correspondent for the *Charleston City Gazette* had quite eloquently summed up the issue that this crisis represented for American nationalism: “. . . are some people impressed with such a reverential awe for England, that they will look up trembling to that country as children do their parents, kissing the hand that strikes, the rod which castigates them? Away, away with such notions . . . arouse, O my countrymen, be yourselves, be Americans! Do not suffer any power on earth to trample upon you with impunity—You have broken the leading strings which shackled your infancy; you are come to manhood, and I hope that you can cope with any one who dares to be your enemy.”

Jefferson did not have to regret rejecting the Monroe-Pinkney Treaty, for the changes in the international situation were soon to make it irrelevant. Indeed, shortly before the treaty was to be signed in December 1806, the news of the Berlin Decree wreaked havoc among the British cabinet, which was now deprived of the moderating influence of Charles Fox, who had died in September. According to the decree, all British goods found on the territory of France or its allies were to be confiscated, and all ships from neutral or belligerent countries trading with Great Britain or its colonies were to be seized. Great Britain had then resorted with a series of Orders in Council that were promulgated in November 1807, under which any ship carrying merchandise to or from a port under French authority would be good for the taking, unless it first stopped over in Great Britain to pay customs duties. This constituted a blockade of all of Europe, and it amounted to forbidding the United States to trade with any country except Great Britain, whereas the Fox blockade of May 1806 had only been strictly applied to the coast stretching from the mouth of the Seine to Ostende. In the beginning of 1808 Napoleon’s “continental system” applied to all of Europe with the exception of Sweden and Turkey. The result was that neutral American commerce was caught between the British maritime blockade and the French continental one.

The Failure of the Embargo

Americans had already felt considerable irritation over these measures as well as the increasing impressments aboard their merchant ships. Then in June 1807 came news that was to create an uproar throughout the nation: one of the frigates
of the American navy, the *Chesapeake*, had been attacked by a British warship, the *Leopard*, because it refused to surrender three sailors suspected of being British deserters. According to the account given in the *Aurora*, the *Leopard* kept shooting until the *Chesapeake* could no longer sustain the enemy fire and lowered its flag.\(^5\) The attack violated American sovereignty by hitting one of its most conspicuous symbols, namely, the navy, toward which the British frigate seemed not to have shown the least bit of consideration. The whole nation was therefore humiliated; furthermore, this was an act of war between two countries at peace, aimed at implementing the principle of impressment, which the United States had officially condemned as undermining its own sovereignty.

From north to south, the American people were in a rage. Even the Federalist newspapers echoed the numerous patriotic resolutions that were passed by citizens’ assemblies in Norfolk, Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and so on.\(^5\) The addresses sent by citizens denounced the action of the *Leopard* and expressed their readiness to take up arms, or at any rate to “cooperate with the government in any measures which they may adopt, whether of vengeance or retaliation.”\(^6\) Since the news spread around the time of the Fourth of July celebrations, the traditional toasts made reference to the event, expressing confidence in the American navy and support for the president. As the citizens of Groton, Massachusetts, put it to the president, “in repelling foreign insult, may he find us all united.”\(^6\) In an outburst of patriotism strengthened by hostility toward Great Britain, the nation was indeed united in support of its president; it kept a lid on political dissent, much to the satisfaction of the progovernment *Aurora*: “We congratulate the country upon the propitious fact, that in every quarter and amongst all classes of Americans, the utmost abhorrence of the late indignity to the nation is manifested. . . .” Similarly, one of the editorialists of the *Boston Columbian Centinel*, an opposition newspaper, declared his solidarity with the patriotic demonstrations, while hinting that he would still disapprove of every one of the executive’s decisions.\(^6\) Such unanimity was not limited to the East Coast, which was more quickly informed of that outrage; as soon as the news reached towns in the West, they too followed suit with patriotic resolutions.\(^6\) In fact, the West and the South eventually proved the most willing to support a forceful reaction of the government.\(^6\)

It remained to be decided what the right attitude should be after such an affront. The first impulse of the *Aurora*’s editorialists was to recommend non-intercourse, which they had been advocating for several years, and which was the favored choice of Republican leaders: “Nothing will bring the British to a sense of their condition, nothing will rescue the American people from disgrace and plunder—*but a total suspension of intercourse*. In three or six months we can reduce them to terms—the provocation we have had and the honor of the nation demand it—the state of Europe will render it doubly efficacious.”\(^6\) As the last sentence indicates, the confidence that pervaded these comments was justified by the
military situation in Europe, where, in the spring of 1807, the allies of Great Britain were losing ground to Napoleon’s forces. On July 7, 1807, at the very moment when the American nation was raging over the abuses of the British navy, France and Russia signed a peace treaty, and on July 9, Prussia in turn came to terms with Napoleon. But whereas the whole nation was behind Jefferson, urging him to avenge the national honor that Great Britain had trampled upon so often, he felt it was enough to publish a proclamation, dated July 2, 1807, whereby he demanded compensation from Great Britain. Although Jefferson also thought that non-intercourse would be the best way of striking Great Britain, he preferred to let Congress take that decision, which meant delaying it until the fall. This wait-and-see strategy was also intended to give American ships time to reach their home ports, which actually meant no time was being lost: “It gives us at the same time an opportunity of getting home our vessels, our property and our seamen—the only means of carrying on the kind of war we should attempt.”

Jefferson had no doubt that congressmen, when they met, would favor non-intercourse over war. On July 3, the Aurora in turn expressed its trust in measures of commercial retaliation:

War we do not apprehend—there may be some hostilities committed by ships, and depredations may increase, but we have the power to command peace, and on our own terms. . . .

A suspension of intercourse will convert the whole West India interest in England, which is stronger than any other, into active enemies of the present ministry—it will throw upon the parishes of England, tens of thousands of paupers, in addition to the present member. . . . The cessation of imports from America, of cotton, flour, rice, etc., will give a shock to the government, that it will with difficulty sustain; and the cessation of exports to this country, the medium of the greatest part of British trade in manufactures, will place every class in England, in the same bankrupt and wretched condition.

While Jefferson and the Aurora’s editors could serenely envision a war of commercial retaliation, the same was not true for the majority of Americans. The surge in patriotism that had arisen among the American people after the attack on the Chesapeake translated into warlike passion, not into that noble spirit of republican self-denial that was a condition of non-intercourse, as envisioned by Jefferson. On July 10, 1807, he wrote that the country had not known such excitement since the Battle of Lexington, and on July 17 he used that comparison once again. The Aurora acknowledged the situation when it wrote: “Everything around us breathes the spirit of war. The volunteer corps are parading in the morning and evening. The young are animated by the highest sensations of military ardour, and the old heroes of the war are seen shedding tears of joy at the revived spirit of the American Revolution.”
Jefferson realized that the situation was now ripe for the United States, as a united nation, to initiate hostilities against Great Britain without delay: “They have often enough, God knows, given us cause of war before; but it has been on points which would not have united the nation. But now they have touched a chord which vibrates in every heart.” Before taking action, however, he had to wait for an answer from the British, whatever it might be, and hope that, in the meantime, public opinion remained pro-war. The problem was that this kind of enthusiasm could not last for long without something to feed the fire. Waiting for three months would surely weaken the resolve of American citizens. By July 20, the Aurora felt the need to exhort its readers not to forget the abuse the nation had suffered and not to be satisfied merely with the withdrawal of British ships out of American waters: “We have repeatedly called upon the public not to relax into supineness, and false confidence in the apparent retreat of the British commodore from his first insolent ground.”

When writing his July 2 proclamation, Jefferson apparently did not expect that the popular outcry would, only a few days later, demand more aggressive retaliation measures than those he had in mind. The American people and their president reacted in entirely different ways: for the people of Norfolk or Groton, the president must avenge the honor of the nation forcefully and speedily; for Jefferson, the right course of action consisted in planning a form of response, that is, non-intercourse, that would suit the situation of the country and the republican faith of its citizens. Unlike John Adams in 1798, Jefferson did not know how to utilize the anger and indignant patriotism of his fellow countrymen in such a way as to have an impact on Great Britain, without at the same time leading the country into a useless war; as a matter of fact, he did not see a way to reconcile his strategy with the anger of the citizens: “[T]he present ministry, perhaps no ministry which can now be formed, will not in my opinion give us the necessary assurance, respecting our flag. In that case, it must bring on a war soon, and if so, it can never be in a better time. I look to this, therefore, as most probably now to take place, although I do most sincerely wish that a just and sufficient security may be given us, and such an interruption of our prosperity avoided.” Although at the peak of popular anger Jefferson did toy with the idea of a war with Great Britain, and although he hoped that the patriotic fervor of citizens would last, he ultimately was really opposed to war. As soon as the popular fervor abated, he was again able to explain the reasons behind his nonaggressive attitude. In his view, the United States could not go to war until its prosperity was definitively established through removal of the national debt: “[T]ime may produce peace in Europe that removes the ground of difference with England until another European war, and that may find our revenues liberated by the discharge of our national debt, our wealth, numbers increasing, our friendship and our enmity more important to every nation.” According to the views of the U.S. president, then, the greatness of
the new nation would make itself felt through its wealth and its strength, and it would be recognized by Great Britain and other nations without blood being shed; Jefferson presumed—wrongly, as we shall see—that the nation shared these views. It would seem, then, that in Jefferson's opinion, the reason why the popular fury had abated was that the American population had rallied to the judiciousness of his economic and nonaggressive war plan.

As a result, when the American leaders finally found out that the British government refused, as had been expected, to forbid the impressment of sailors and intended to separate that issue from the Chesapeake affair, Jefferson and Congress logically opted to respond by setting up an embargo. It is hard, however, not to think that such a measure was regarded by American patriots as a real retreat, as compared to what had been considered at the peak of the crisis in July 1807. Back then the Aurora had written: “The crisis has, in fact, arrived, when England must either peacefully accede to the demands . . . or engage in a war . . . there is no other alternative: on our part, we cannot recede, we cannot abandon the high and just ground we have taken, without becoming the scorn of mankind.” The embargo meant that the Republican leaders could implement the policy of commercial retaliation they had been dreaming of since 1789. In theory, conditions were favorable: England was isolated both militarily and economically, and the United States had just enjoyed over ten years of prosperity, with the sole interruption of the Peace of Amiens. An embargo should then make it possible for the United States to defeat Great Britain, without investing in costly military preparations and without really putting its prosperity at risk, since the embargo was supposed to be short-lived. It was also supposed to have the added advantage of boosting American industry, which until then had been neglected in favor of trade, and thus of producing a better overall balance of the American economy. In the words of historian John R. Nelson Jr., “as the policy's failure to coerce England became evident, its salutary impact on manufacturing became its principal justification.”

The embargo could not have been a popular policy. For it to bear fruit, it needed the support of the whole nation; and already back in July 1807, the consensus had been in favor not of an embargo, but of a declaration of war. After that date, in the absence of further sensational attacks by the British navy, popular enthusiasm had waned. In addition, not all of the American leaders actually agreed to defend a measure that Treasury Secretary Gallatin called “a doubtful policy, and hastily adopted.” In fact, the optimistic mood of late June 1807, when the Aurora's editorialists predicted an immediate collapse of the British economy upon implementing non-intercourse, quickly yielded to real disillusion. On May 2, 1808, the Spaniards rose up against Napoleon, and South American markets opened up to British trade. Hope was rekindled among the British business community, which had feared the worst from the continental blockade. British exports grew from 37 million pounds in 1808 to 47 million in 1809,
even without the United States, which until then had made up a third of the British export market. The embargo on American products might have been disastrous for the British textile industry, if it were not for the fact that sizeable stocks had been piled up the previous year. Also, the British managed against all odds to supply their Caribbean islands, and British planters, whose support the Americans had counted on, were actually delighted to be rid of the competition of French and Spanish colonial products, which formerly had been transported by the American merchant marine.

Although in Great Britain the poorest were hurt by the rise in the price of wheat, and although textile workers suffered from unemployment and misery, the protests of these groups were never enough to shake the national union that the continental blockade created in the country. As Bradford Perkins observed, “the miseries of a disenfranchised and inarticulate proletariat could not be expected to sway the policy of the cabinet.” The embargo, which was supposed to last only a few months, became a problem and a seeming dead end, which Americans were compelled to get used to. In New England the economic situation immediately took an unexpected turn: for unemployed sailors, the embargo did not mean a republican sacrifice, but the loss of a job, with no alternative prospect. By January 7, 1808, William Bentley, a Republican minister from Salem, Massachusetts, wrote in his diary: “A procession of mariners and persons without employment from the embargo, paraded the streets of Boston with a flag halfmast, to excite alarm, and not without encouragement from our internal enemies.” In his eagerness to support Jefferson against the embargo’s enemies, William Bentley later on avoided dwelling on the topic. In September 1808 he stated that he had not noticed an increase in the number of paupers, but in fact, Salem was badly hurt by the embargo, and by early 1809, 15 percent of the inhabitants were reduced to begging. Beginning in the spring of 1808, the anger of sailors, shipowners, and merchants from the northeastern states enabled those whom William Bentley called the “internal enemies,” that is, the Federalists, to regain a real audience and win back their dominant position in New England. In the mid-Atlantic states, the rise of manufacturing predated the embargo and did not stop, which helped keep down discontent. In the southern states, cotton prices dropped, but that trend had started in 1805, and so these states continued to support the government. The crisis was perhaps more taxing for New England merchants, who suddenly went from unequalled prosperity to poverty, than it was for southern farmers and planters, who had seen prices decline for three years and were less hard-hit. It is also possible that the traditionally Republican loyalties of southern citizens played a significant role in their attitudes.

The western pioneers also suffered from the economic backlash of the embargo, since their merchandise could no longer be exported. Far from protesting, however, they vigorously supported government decisions; indeed, they felt even
more bitter about insults to American sovereignty since these insults went along with renewed military aid from Great Britain to the northwestern Indians. There had been skirmishes between the pioneers and the Shawnee Indians since 1803.\textsuperscript{90} In the spring of 1808 the British had initiated new contacts with Tecumseh and his brother Tenskwatawa.\textsuperscript{91} In September 1809 William Henry Harrison, the governor of the Indiana Territory, purchased huge areas of land in the Wabash valley, which was the last area with a large amount of game, and prepared for military occupation. Since Tecumseh opposed such sales, Harrison thus indirectly strengthened the chief’s influence with the majority of northwestern tribes. For westerners, the enemy was clearly England.

Once it became clear that the embargo did not produce the desired effect, and that the administration was nevertheless going to keep enforcing it, northeastern discontent changed into a rebellion against an economic policy that drove the area into misery without offering measures of compensation. Violations of the embargo became common: on the Canadian border, violent confrontations pitted smugglers against customs officers; in certain ports, ships laden with contraband goods sailed off in contempt of injunctions from government officials.\textsuperscript{92} By August 6, 1808, Albert Gallatin, who was in charge of enforcing the embargo, wrote in unambiguous terms: “I deeply regret to see my incessant efforts in every direction to carry the law into effect defeated in so many quarters, that we will probably produce, at least on the British, but an inconsiderable effect by a measure which at the same time threatens the Republican interest. For there is almost an equal chance that if propositions from Great Britain or other events do not put into our power to raise the embargo before the 1st of October, we will lose the presidential election.”\textsuperscript{93} The embargo was an unpopular measure that alienated much of the nation from the government; despite the support of the South and the West, these ill feelings must have spread beyond the mere Northeast, since Gallatin envisioned a Republican defeat in the 1808 presidential election, which was a national contest.\textsuperscript{94} The secretary of the treasury cautioned that if the embargo had to be prolonged, “arbitrary” measures would be needed; as a bona fide Republican who had fought against the 1798 laws, Gallatin felt such powers were dangerous. The embargo had failed to mobilize American patriotism: “the people, being distracted by the complexity of the subject, orders of council, decrees, embargoes, and wanting a single object which might rouse their patriotism and unite their passions and affections, selfishness has assumed the reins in several quarters, and the people are now there altogether against the law.”\textsuperscript{95} Toward the end of 1808, Jefferson thus found it necessary to propose a bill reinforcing the embargo, which was passed in early 1809. This act was aimed at the state of insurrection on the Canadian border. It enabled the Federalists to point out once again the inconsistency of the Republicans—as democrats who smothered liberty. It was now the Federalists’ turn to don the garment of
democratic principles. Equating the smugglers of 1808 with the insurgents of 1776 and Thomas Jefferson with George III, they claimed the revolutionary heritage for a New England turned Federalist once again: “Gentlemen have said much about insurrection and rebellion; and in language not very conciliatory, pointed their allusions to the people of New England. Other rulers pronounced them rebels, more than thirty years ago: while many then unborn now wish to cover themselves with their mantle, and to share the honors of the patriots of 1776.” A political insurrection, however, was not at hand, despite the Federalists’ dreams; instead, what was happening then in New England was, justifiably, economic unrest, which revealed not a divided nation, but above all the failure of the embargo policy and its planners. By trying to impose a measure that had failed to excite enthusiasm, and which proved to be disastrous, Jefferson had severely jeopardized the credibility of a government that in principle was founded on popular sovereignty. The Federalists’ success only confirmed the loss of faith.

The embargo had been designed at a moment when the United States was carried away by economic prosperity and thought it possible to bring Great Britain to terms in a few months’ time; it was therefore proving to be a bitter failure. The executive had stubbornly kept enforcing a measure that was clearly unpopular, and as a result, had impoverished the nation that should, in the leaders’ view, have rallied around their determination. The reason behind the failure of the embargo was not merely that Great Britain had put up an exceptional resistance; it was also that Jefferson and the American people had in fact interpreted the meaning of this confrontation with Great Britain in completely opposite ways. In Norfolk or New York, when citizens had learned of the Leopard’s conduct, they had quickly reached the conclusion that such an outrage was tantamount to a declaration of war, and that it called for an appropriate response, that is, a military one. Americans were ready to go to war against Great Britain so as to sever, once and for all, the postcolonial links that still bound them to their former parent country. For all their economic power, they had not yet achieved the recognition they felt they deserved.

Moving Toward the War of 1812: Reflections and Interpretations

Between 1809 and 1811 diplomatic relations between the United States and Great Britain deteriorated slowly but surely. In March 1809 the government substituted for the decidedly unpopular embargo a policy that was supposed to be more effective: the Non-Intercourse Act, which allowed commercial relations with all countries except France and Great Britain. In July of the same year, the rejection of the Erskine Agreement dashed the last hopes for an
Anglo-American reconciliation. David M. Erskine, the British minister plenipotentiary who was fairly favorable to the United States, had hoped to use the lifting of the embargo as an occasion to settle the differences of opinion between the two countries. Eager to strike an agreement at all costs, he had deviated from Canning’s orders, much to the latter’s dismay; the agreement had therefore been rejected, and Erskine was recalled.98

Along with the rejection of the Erskine Agreement came the announcement of new Orders in Council, which were no more favorable to American commerce than the previous ones had been. New modes of economic coercion were then undertaken by Congress. Nathaniel Macon’s Bill No. 2, introduced on May 1, 1810, lifted restrictions on American trade with Europe but also stipulated that if one of the warring parties repealed its decrees against American trade, the United States would take up non-intercourse measures against the other unless it followed suit. France, however, far from taking the bait and repealing its decrees, confiscated with the Rambouillet decree ten million francs worth of American property.99

It seemed that the United States was facing the two warring nations alone, and that it could bring neither one to terms with the kind of measures that the Republicans had favored since 1789. The first one to give up on this war of attrition was the American minister plenipotentiary in Great Britain, William Pinkney, who left London on February 28, 1811. Signs of the hostilities to come were already accumulating in the United States. In 1810 the new Congress was elected; although its first session would not open until October 1811, its makeup revealed the voters’ desire for change, since more than half of the former Congress was voted out, and many of the newcomers were very young and pro-war: they were nicknamed the “war hawks.”

The first naval confrontation took place on May 16, 1811, when the American frigate President attacked the British ship Little Belt, resulting in nine dead and twenty-three injured. Whether this attack was justified is not at all clear, but Americans saw the fight as revenge for the Chesapeake incident, and they rejoiced over it.100 Paradoxically, at this very moment the controversy over the Chesapeake was extinguished, as the new British minister, Augustus Foster, came over with an offer for a settlement that James Monroe, as the new secretary of state, accepted. What Foster did not offer, however, was the repeal of the Orders in Council, which alone could have truly satisfied American leaders.101

Meanwhile in the Northwest, in the fall of 1811, Tecumseh left his home, Prophet’s Town at the fork of the Tippecanoe and Wabash Rivers, to join up with the tribes of the old Southwest, whom he guaranteed British aid in the event of war against the United States. William Henry Harrison took advantage of Tecumseh’s absence to attack Prophet’s Town on November 7, 1811, which earned him the nickname of Tippecanoe, and which—if one is to believe Henry Adams—touched off the War of 1812.102
While the battle had in fact already started, the new Congress set about preparing for war. Casting off the Jeffersonian tradition and ideology, which were ostensibly pro-peace, the young Congressmen set up an army of 35,000 men (instead of the existing 10,000), but they did not manage to get a respectable navy created. On June 18, 1812, war was declared. This declaration of war came in the wake of five years of diplomatic tensions between the United States and Great Britain, punctuated by waves of popular anger and fruitless diplomatic missions. Ironically, it was pronounced at the very moment when Great Britain finally yielded to American pressure, since on June 16, 1812, the Orders in Council had been suspended.

In Great Britain, the optimism of 1807 had receded in the face of an economic crisis, and the manufacturing interests had rallied to the cause of the Whig opposition in its attacks on the Tory government. The year 1810 had witnessed consistent deterioration of the British economy. Massive imports of grain, required to fend off the prospect of a food shortage, had caused rising prices, which brought on unrest among the working class population; to make matters worse, a financial crisis had set in, and export attempts to South America had failed. The drop in British exports had been accentuated by Napoleon’s tightened surveillance of the European coasts. Therefore, in 1812 recovery was not in sight, which explains why the decrees were repealed—as a means to improve England’s relations with its one remaining viable economic partner.

In an expression of his anti-Republican bias, Henry Adams depicted the declaration of war not only as a partisan decision, but also as a sectional one. He observed that while declarations of war are usually manifestations of national union, and often sanctioned by at least part of the opposition, such was not the case with the War of 1812, which was declared solely by southern and western Republicans. According to Adams, the War of 1812 distinguished the United States as perhaps the first country to throw itself into a war that it dreaded in the hope that war itself would create the spirit of war. It is true that many American citizens—most of them Federalists—did oppose the war, but even so-called wars of national union never get the approval of the entire population, despite what Henry Adams claimed. As J. C. A. Stagg aptly remarked, in the ultrapartisan political context of the early republic, war could only rouse the hostility of the party not in power. In point of fact, although the Federalists’ opposition to the War of 1812 benefited them throughout the conflict in their northeastern stronghold, in the end it proved fatal to them as a party. From December 15, 1814, to January 5, 1815, delegates from the state assemblies of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island, joined by a few more from Vermont and New Hampshire (who, however, had not been officially commissioned by their state assemblies), gathered in a convention in Hartford, Connecticut. This convention was meeting to protest the war, but public opinion saw it as a separatist congress, traitor to the nation, and once the war was
over and an honorable peace secured, the Hartford convention discredited the Federalist Party forever.107

Like Henry Adams, Donald R. Hickey considers that the War of 1812 was an unpopular one, but his argument is no more convincing than that of his illustrious elder as concerns the southern, central, and western regions. Although he also claims that the causes of the war are shrouded in mystery, he mentions the following causes: an expansionist drive (which explains the attempts at invading Canada and the final occupation of West Florida, with both occurring during the war), the Orders in Council and the impressment issue,108 and ideological factors, such as a will to establish the prestige of the republic and defend the honor and sovereignty of the nation.109 The last aspect is neglected in Hickey’s book, even though he agrees that the war could have been avoided if the real, nonideological factors opposing the two countries had alone been taken into account by diplomats and politicians.

It is clear, however, that the ideological factors played an essential role in the stages leading up to the war, as shown first of all by the selection of Great Britain as the enemy, when France was being just as hostile to the United States, and later by the image of the war in American collective memory, which has generally viewed it as the “Second War of Independence.” Thus, it cannot be ignored that there existed in 1812, latent in the hearts of a large section of the American population, a patriotic fervor that was hostile to England and that pushed for war. No better evidence of that feeling is to be found than the waves of popular anger that followed the attacks on the Chesapeake and the Leander. From November 1811 to June 1812, the war hawks strove to rekindle this warlike ardor, which they knew existed among the population. As historian Steven Watts has clearly explained, the rising postrevolutionary generation saw the prospect of a war as a means of regenerating and redefining America. In that generation of new Republicans, young writers, ministers, or politicians sought to break out of the mold their fathers had forced upon them in order to recreate America.110

The nationalist drive was the means that would enable them to reach their goals: by extolling America versus the former parent country, the young Republicans were the political heirs to George Washington, Gouverneur Morris, and John Adams, and provided a tangible answer to the quest for identity of their countrymen. Through military actions, America was in fact going to give visible proof of its ability to exist and to assert itself in the face of the nations of a world at war. Whatever its outcome, the war was thus supposed to enable Americans to define themselves against others and then, once their identity and sovereignty were recognized, to devote their energies to themselves.

The War of 1812 was not a great military success, as will be shown in the summary of operations that follows. General Hull’s attempted invasion of Canada ended on August 16, 1812, with the British troops taking over Detroit and
the Americans surrendering. Other western posts such as Fort Dearborn (Chicago) later fell to the British, in episodes that betrayed the incompetence of several American field officers. Conversely, the small American navy immediately scored a number of brilliant successes: on July 18, 1812, the frigate Constitution managed to outdistance four British frigates that were chasing it; on August 19, it shattered the vessel Guerrière; on August 25, the frigate United States destroyed the British ship Macedonian. In spite of these isolated feats, however, the British navy had no trouble, from late December 1812 on, in bringing the United States under the grips of a blockade that became tighter and tighter, and in launching deadly raids onto the coast, as in the pillaging of Hampton on the James River. It was only the American privateers that managed to cause constant concern for the British navy, by seizing numerous merchant ships.

As events unfolded, the incompetence of some American leaders became blatant: on December 3, the secretary of war, William Eustis, had to resign, to be followed by the secretary of the navy, Paul Hamilton, on December 29. In the West, a similar overhaul was taking place: following the assignment of William Henry Harrison as head of the army of the Northwest, the British offensive was stopped on August 1, 1813, at Fort Stephenson. On September 10, the American fleet, under the orders of the young officer Olivier Hazard Perry, thrashed the British fleet on Lake Erie. This victory was soon followed by that of the Thames battle (on October 5, 1813), which saw the death of Tecumseh, Harrison’s archenemy. These successes were followed, however, by the failure at the end of the year of a new plan for the invasion of Canada, carried out by the famously inefficient General Wilkinson.

The year 1814 first saw a British fleet penetrate into the Chesapeake Bay, and then a troop landed on August 18. After quickly eliminating their opponents, the British walked into a desolate Washington, D.C., where they burned down public monuments (on August 24 and 25, 1814). A few weeks later, Baltimore was besieged (on September 13 and 14) but not taken, a failure that inspired Francis Scott Key to write the American national anthem.

Although shaken by the burning of Washington, D.C., American patriotism was to be rejuvenated by good news: on March 27, 1814, Andrew Jackson earned a decisive victory against the Creeks, who could have allied with the British had they landed; on September 11, at the battle of Lake Champlain, the British suffered a setback in their attempted invasion of the Northwest; and on September 12, Jackson forced the British out of Mobile. The news of these successes enabled the American negotiators not to yield to British demands. Jackson also won the last battle of the war at New Orleans on January 8, 1815, two weeks after peace had been signed at Ghent on December 24, 1814.  

The Americans had suffered smashing defeats, and highly symbolic ones in terms of national identity, such as the burning of their new capital,
Washington, D.C.; yet of the war they only remembered their victories, such as the 1815 Battle of New Orleans. In 1815 a national cult was to build up around that battle and its winner, Andrew Jackson; this proved that a conflict with Great Britain could fulfill American nationalism, and it answered American citizens’ wish for recognition. As long as they did not obtain that recognition, which alone would loosen their ties to Europe and avenge their national honor, Americans could not confidently set out to conquer the continent. In fact, how could the West be conquered as long as Great Britain supplied the Indians with arms and food, thus perpetuating a threat on the frontier? The War of 1812 also put an end to these alliances that imperiled American expansion. By 1813 William Henry Harrison had reached his goal in the Northwest, with the Indian defeat at the Battle of the Thames, where Tecumseh died; in the Southwest, Andrew Jackson’s victory over the Red Sticks (hostile Creeks) at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend put him in a position to dictate, in August 1814, the terms of a merciless treaty that dispossessed all the Creeks, friends or foes.

Contrary to the war hawks, who in 1811 had supported the logic of recognition through confrontation, Jefferson—though he sometimes considered going to war against Great Britain—had favored the logic of recognition through continental development and isolation until his exit from power in 1809; in that scheme of things, relations with Europe, whether with Great Britain or any other country, already played a minimal role. In October 1808, at the time when he was strengthening the embargo despite popular opposition, he wrote about South America: “We consider their interests and ours as the same, and that the object of both must be to exclude all European influence from this hemisphere.”

Jefferson knew that the commercial prosperity the United States enjoyed could not last forever: it depended on the continuation of hostilities in Europe and the good will of Great Britain, mistress of the seas, as had been proved by the Orders in Council of 1807. Since 1789 he had always been of the opinion that the United States must draw maximum benefit from European crises so as to solve the public debt and lay the foundations for American prosperity by developing commercial relations with Europe. He also knew, however, that the nation’s economic development would have to rely on more diverse resources, including manufacturing and farming. The Louisiana Purchase, by doubling the area of American territory, was evidence that a great domestic market, that is, a great continental market, could and must be created. The breaking of commercial ties with Saint-Domingue in 1806 showed that foreign trade was no longer the capital objective of American development. The embargo was therefore to be, according to Jefferson, the first vigorous step in the transition of the American economy. Had it succeeded, it would have brought the new nation the added advantage of reconciling its economic development...
and the recognition by other nations of both its status as a great power and its exceptional character. To defeat the former parent country by the sheer virtue of stoic courage and republican unanimity was a typically Jeffersonian project.

By electing young representatives who were ready to declare war, American citizens demonstrated that the classical republican virtues of self-denial and sacrifice were no longer relevant for them. They might be ready to take up the big continental challenge, but they would first avenge their national honor in a more traditional and less stoic fashion than that recommended by Jefferson and the Republican old guard. Only the War of 1812 could bring the new nation the recognition it sought before setting out to conquer the great domestic market that the American continent was to become. As noted above, the war was actually to be the means for Americans to assert openly a global continental ambition, from Canada to Florida, and this time with arms rather than scientific expeditions. The American complex as an “inferior nation” was erased by the Peace of Ghent, which reestablished the territorial status quo ante between Great Britain and the United States in North America, and which the U.S. Senate ratified on February 16, 1815. From then on, Americans did not have any more accounts to settle with their former parent country, and they could now turn their energies toward fulfilling their “manifest destiny.”