

Causes of the War of 1812

In order to fully understand the importance of the American naval victory occurring in this painting, we must first understand exactly why the United States went to war against Great Britain in 1812. It was not one, but a series of factors that ultimately led to the decision to take up arms against the greatest naval power of the day. An important, often overlooked, factor that led to the War of 1812 was the **Louisiana Purchase**. The United States wanted the large swath of land for westward expansion and exploration; France urgently needed money to pay for soldiers and supplies in its coming war with Great Britain. After some negotiating, the United States paid \$15 million for the territory. Shortly thereafter, Napoleon declared war on Great Britain, and the resulting series of conflicts, collectively called the **Napoleonic Wars** (1803-1815), wreaked havoc on the French and English economies. As European rural economies slowed, the United States became a major supplier of commodities to Britain and France, both of whom urged the young country to remain neutral during the conflict.

In addition to exporting their own goods, American ships also **re-exported** goods from the Caribbean colonies of France and Britain back to Europe. At first American suppliers made huge profits, but as the war grew to a stalemate, with Napoleon occupying mainland Europe and the British controlling the seas, the warring countries soon began to interfere with the American re-export trade. Angered by this trade, Britain decided to try and starve the French in to submission by blockading French ports and consequently all American ships bound for France. They reasoned this course of action with the resurrected **Rule of 1756**, which declared that if neutral countries transported goods from an enemy colony to the continent, it would be seen as an act of war. The rule also decreed that neutral nations in wartime could only carry items that had been transported in times of peace; effectively banning re-export trade. In the eyes of Great Britain, this rule legitimized the seizure of American ships. While both countries seized American ships to stymie the other, British seizures were seen as a much more grievous act as they took place off American shores, while French seizures took place in and near French-controlled European ports.

Angered at Britain for violating neutral trade rights, the United States Congress passed the **Non-Importation Act of 1806** which barred the importation of British goods that could be made in America or could be purchased through any other country. Britain responded by using its navy to further block French-controlled European ports. France replied by outlawing trade with Britain. Various decrees were soon volleyed back and forth. If the U.S. complied with one country's regulations, it became a target of the other.

Further angering Americans, the British Royal Navy also took part in **impressment**, a practice that forced captured American sailors into service for the Royal Navy. Britain initially practiced impressment to look for deserters of the Royal Navy who had joined American merchant ships for better pay, food, and conditions. Yet soon, impressing American- born sailors became common practice; an estimated 6,000 American sailors were impressed before the United States declared war in 1812. Britain's practice of impressing Americans grew as their war with France intensified, and the need for more sailors became paramount. Efforts by the United States to remain neutral in the face of these factors fell flat. In his message to Congress, dated June 1, 1812, President James Madison stated that, "the conduct of [Britain's] Government presents a series of acts hostile to the United States as an independent and neutral nation." He outlined three important validations for going to war. The first was on the subject of neutral rights: "Our commerce has been plundered in every sea, the great staples of our country have been cut off from their legitimate markets, and a destructive blow aimed at our agricultural and maritime interests." The second dealt with the issue of British impressment:

The practice, hence, is so far from affecting British subjects alone that, under the pretext of searching for these, thousands of American citizens, under the safeguard of public law and of their national flag, have been torn from their country and from everything dear to them; have been dragged on board ships of war of a foreign nation and exposed, under the severities of their discipline, to be exiled to the most distant and deadly climes, to risk their lives in the battles of their oppressors, and to be the melancholy instruments of taking away those of their own brethren.

The third justification concerned the association between the British and the American Indians: "It is difficult to account for the activity and combinations which have for some time been developing themselves among tribes in constant intercourse with British traders and garrisons without connecting their hostility with that influence and without recollecting the authenticated examples of such interpositions heretofore furnished by the officers and agents of that Government."

Following this defense, Madison made a final push for war:

Our moderation and conciliation have had no other effect than to encourage perseverance and to enlarge pretensions. . . . Whether the United States shall continue passive under these progressive usurpations and these accumulating wrongs, or, opposing force to force in defense of their national rights, shall commit a just cause into the hands of the Almighty Disposer of Events . . . is a solemn question which the Constitution wisely confides to the legislative department of the Government. In

recommending it to their early deliberations I am happy in the assurance that the decision will be worthy the enlightened and patriotic councils of a virtuous, a free, and a powerful nation.

Going to war with Britain was required if the United States was to maintain its sovereignty and its maritime rights.

Congress agreed with President Madison and declared war on June 18, 1812, but the vote was far from unanimous. Representatives from the Western and Southern states, the primary beneficiaries of a victory over Britain, were in favor. The Northeastern states were opposed, as they had the most to lose with their commercial rights and businesses at stake. Despite the justification President Madison provided for going to war, many Americans believed that the real motives were less than noble. Some thought that war was declared because of America's wounded pride and loss of honor because of the successive British impressments and rights violations. Others suspected, and correctly so, that the war was solely an opportunity for the United States to expand its borders and attain sought-after territory in the Northwest (Canada) and in the South (present-day Florida,) which were occupied by several tribes of Indians and controlled by British and Spanish powers, respectively.

Knowing that confronting an unrivaled naval power like Britain at sea would be unwise, the United States resolved to primarily challenge the British on land by invading British occupied Canada. They reasoned that Canada would be both valuable, for its land, and vulnerable due to its small population and light defense. Additionally, Canada was also the area from which Britain stimulated anti-American aggression and sentiment amongst the American Indians. The Indians resented American settlers for occupying their land, and for competing with them for the supply of wild game, and the Indians' livelihoods depended on fur trade with Europe. With Britain furnishing the Indians with supplies, it was only a matter of time before Indian leader Tecumseh would come to power and organize a pan-tribal coalition to take on the expanding American empire.

Glossary

impressment: the act or policy of seizing persons and compelling them to serve in the military, especially in naval services.

Louisiana Purchase: (1803) purchased from France during President Thomas Jefferson's administration, the region of the United States encompassing land between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains.

Napoleonic Wars: (1803-1815) a series of major conflicts between the French Empire, led by Emperor Napoleon I, against several European nations.

Non-Importation Act of 1806: passed by Congress, the act banned certain imports from Britain as an attempt to counteract British violations of neutrality.

re-exported: the process of repackaging foreign goods in American ports.

Rule of 1756: a British policy enacted during the Seven Years' War (the conflict is known as the French and Indian War in America) which specified that Britain would not do trade with neutral countries who also traded with the enemy.