

Foreign Policy 1789-1812:

When the Constitution was drafted in 1789, Americans did not have a sense of national identity. The process toward achieving a national identity was long and fraught with conflict. Some of the most influential events on the United States were foreign affairs. American reactions to these events reveal the gradual coalescence of national identity.

There were three main foreign policy issues the founding fathers faced in early America. First, people in the United States would have to balance their relationships with Britain and France—Europe’s constantly warring duo. Americans had found themselves embroiled in the conflict between Britain and France before. During the French and Indian War they had fought with the British against the French. Then during the Revolutionary War, they had enjoyed assistance from France in their struggle for independence from Britain.

As George Washington took office in 1789, he and his administration set out to steer a neutral course among the warring nations and shifting alliances of Europe. Aware of the comparative military weakness of the United States, the Washington administration felt it had to keep the young republic free of any military entanglements with Britain and France. This was a policy that made good economic sense as well. The founders wanted the economy of the United States to benefit from “neutral” trade, or trade that did not favor any nation over another or cause the United States to have to support any warring nation.

Second, the United States wanted to take advantage of the vast territories and potential wealth on its frontiers. This would not be easy. In 1787, Britain had forts in the Northwest, and Spain held the Louisiana Territory and Florida. In addition, the Native Americans who lived on these frontiers did not like the U.S. government’s expansionist ideas.

Finally, the struggle to create a foreign policy mirrored the struggle to define what the United States would be like domestically. One school of thought—reflected in the vision of Thomas Jefferson—saw the nation as a land of small farmers. Jefferson had an affinity for France and its efforts to end its monarchy, while to him Great Britain was the epitome of tyranny. Jefferson also hoped that France would become the prime market for the agricultural goods of the U.S. South. A second school of thought—represented in particular by Alexander Hamilton—imagined a United States that would prosper through manufacturing and the help of a strong, central government. Hamilton believed that Britain’s trade and wealth would contribute to the growth of an industrial economy in the United States.

Between 1793 and 1815, the European continent was engulfed in a series of wars pitting the French against the British. The United States, dependent on trade for economic survival, found it could not please one without angering the other. Indeed, during this time Great Britain and France frequently seized U.S. ships. By 1812, many U.S. leaders felt all their efforts to retain independence and secure safe trade had been exhausted, but they were not in agreement about what to do next.

The Washington Administration (1789-1797)

Washington did all he could to balance the intents of his arguing cabinet members, impositions placed on American vessels by both the British and French, while avoiding war. He sent John Jay, chief justice of the Supreme Court, to England to negotiate a settlement to this increasingly serious crisis. He returned with one of the most controversial treaties in U.S. history. The controversy revolved around what the treaty accomplished as well as what it did not. Jay managed to secure British evacuation of the Northwest forts, as promised in the 1783 Treaty of Paris.

The treaty failed to address the issues of neutral trading rights and the impressment of sailors. Jay did gain limited access to British ports in the West Indies, but for only two years. The British won the right to continue the fur trade with the Native Americans on the U.S. side of the Canadian border—a point that angered many western settlers. Democratic-Republicans saw the treaty as a Federalist surrender to the British. Public outcry was intense.

The Adams Administration (1797-1801)

John Adams, a Massachusetts Federalist with a distinguished record of governmental service and diplomacy, entered the presidency in 1797 with three handicaps: his predecessor, his vice-president, and himself. Adams had the unenviable task of following George Washington, the only president elected unanimously by the Electoral College. In addition, John Adams' vice-president was the Democratic-Republican Thomas Jefferson. Adams was also a difficult individual. He was assertive, self-righteous, and thin-skinned to a fault. His temperament was not suited to the increasingly contested political system of the early U.S. republic.

Deteriorating relations with France claimed much of the Adams administration's energy and time. Locked in a continuing struggle with its perennial enemy Great Britain, France began to seize U.S. ships on the high seas after the ratification of the Jay Treaty in 1795. France believed that the Jay Treaty had broken any pretense of U.S. neutrality.

How did the United States react to the seizure of its ships?

Adams attempted to reach a negotiated settlement with the French by sending three negotiators, Charles Pinckney, John Marshall, and Elbridge Gerry to France. The French Foreign Minister Charles Talleyrand sent three mysterious emissaries to demand a \$250,000 bribe before he would even receive the three U.S. negotiators. The U.S. delegates refused to pay for the privilege of negotiating. This became known as the XYZ affair, because the U.S. negotiators referred to the French emissaries as X, Y, and Z in their dispatches. The news provoked outrage at home. The saying of the day became, "Millions for defense but not one cent for tribute." Hostilities degenerated into a state of war at sea between France and the United States, but President Adams did not ask Congress to declare war.

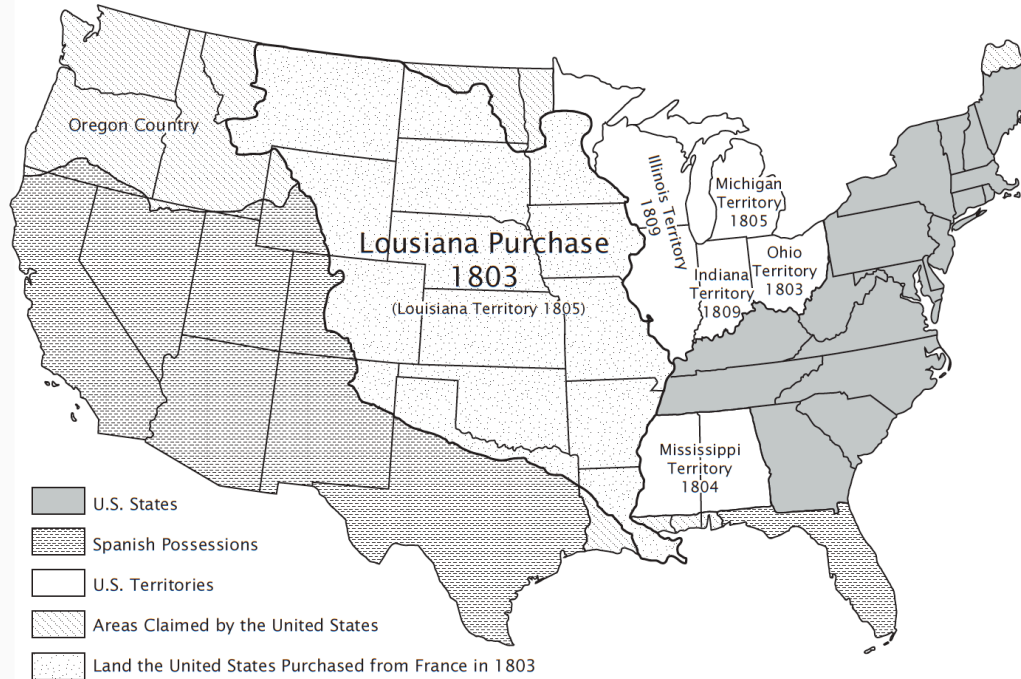
This state of war (sometimes referred to as the Quasi-War) played out on the high seas around the Caribbean islands

The Jefferson Administration (1801-1809)

With the giants of Europe at peace from 1801 to late 1803, U.S. commerce flourished, and French interest in North America increased. Napoleon had reacquired the Louisiana Territory from Spain in 1800 in order to use the region to supply his colonies in the Caribbean. The United States reacted with concern. France was powerful—Spain was not. Navigation of the Mississippi and access to the port of New Orleans were critical to U.S. commerce.

The United States sent James Monroe to France to offer to buy New Orleans and part of Florida from Napoleon. Before Monroe arrived, Napoleon lost his taste for empire in the new world. The successful rebellion of enslaved people in Haiti, led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, made Napoleon believe that the cost wasn't worth the gain. Expecting renewed war with Great Britain, Napoleon offered the Louisiana Territory for \$15 million. Without time to wait for instructions from Jefferson, Monroe accepted the offer. It was a major accomplishment.

The United States in 1810



With this purchase, the United States nearly doubled its size (see map on page ii). Jefferson believed that he had expanded the “Empire of Liberty” and secured U.S. use of the Mississippi River and the port of New Orleans for U.S. farmers in the Ohio River Valley.

During Jefferson’s second administration, relations with both Great Britain and France took a turn for the worse. The sea power of Great Britain posed a major obstacle to Napoleon’s vision of

a vast French empire. In the Berlin Decree in 1806, Napoleon ordered the nations of Europe to stop buying British goods. Great Britain responded by decreeing that all ships carrying trade for the continent had to stop in Britain first where they would be searched for war materials. This decree was known as the Orders in Council. France countered by saying that all ships that stopped in Britain were liable to seizure. U.S. shippers were caught between a rock and a hard place. If they proceeded directly to France, their ships were liable to seizure by Britain. If they proceeded first to Great Britain they were subject to seizure by the French.

In 1807, the HMS *Leopard* stopped the U.S. naval vessel the *USS Chesapeake*. When the U.S. captain refused to allow the British to search for deserters from the British navy, the British captain opened fire, killing three and wounding eighteen. He also removed four sailors. This attack on a U.S. naval vessel led to calls for war. Jefferson refused to give in to popular demand. Instead, he ordered British warships out of U.S. waters and instructed the U.S. minister in London, James Monroe, to demand an apology and a halt to impressment. British Foreign Secretary George Canning was eager to avert a war with the United States because he was concerned that war might divert Britain’s resources from its battle with Napoleon, but he did not give in completely. He noted that the admiral responsible for the order that led to the attack on the *Chesapeake* had been dismissed, but he refused to bend on the question of impressment.

The whole affair led Jefferson to a new and radical view of diplomacy. He believed that nations should be linked by trade and that U.S. commerce (instead of war), could be a weapon of diplomacy. The United States chose to send a strong message by imposing an all-out embargo that stopped all trade. Passage of the Embargo Act of 1807 confined all U.S. ships to harbor in an effort to deny France and Great Britain agricultural and

manufactured products. The embargo did not severely harm the economies of Britain and France. In fact, the U.S. economy was hurt far more. Thousands were put out of work and there was wide- spread public dissent

Madison's First Administration (1809-1813)

In an effort to reopen trade between the United States and Britain, David Erskine, British minister to the United States, opened negotiations with U.S. Secretary of State Robert Smith in April 1809. The resulting Erskine Agreement stated that Britain would drop its requirement that U.S. ships stop to be searched in Britain for war materials in return for an agreement from the United States not to trade with France. Madison was pleased with this agreement. He announced that on June 10, 1809 trade would reopen with Britain, while remaining closed with France. Unfortunately for the United States, Erskine's bargain did not meet with approval from the British foreign secretary, who swiftly rejected the agreement. The agreement was not turned down quickly enough to stop a large number of U.S. ships from embarking to Great Britain, where they were seized. Soon thereafter, Madison reinstat- ed a policy of no trade with Great Britain.

While U.S. leaders tried to respond to the manipulations of Britain and France so that they could maintain rights to conduct trade, domestic politics changed significantly. In the elections of 1810, voters sent many young westerners to Congress. The new Congress chose Henry Clay, a young Kentuckian, as Speaker of the House. Clay and his allies were not particularly affected by the impressment of U.S. sailors, nor by trade issues, but they did regard these issues as insults to the U.S. flag. More impor- tantly, they viewed this as an opportune time to acquire land on the frontier and even to conquer Canada, a British colony. Clay and a group of fellow congressmen were soon labeled "war hawks" because they favored war with Great Britain.

These expansionist desires were nothing new. In 1809, Ohio Governor William Henry Harrison had gotten three Native American chiefs drunk and convinced them to sign away three million acres of land. In response, the Shawnee Chief Tecumseh formed a confederacy of tribes to resist westward expansion. After several years of fighting, a full-scale battle took place in 1811 at the Tippecanoe River. Both sides lost many soldiers, but the Native Americans withdrew. After the battle, some of the weapons abandoned by the Native Americans were found to be of Canadian origin. The "war hawks" of Congress assumed the British had armed the Native Americans. Their cry of the day became "On to Canada."

In the early months of 1812, Clay, John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, Felix Grundy of Tennes- see, and others began to steer the Congress towards a harsher policy toward Great Britain. To help make their case, the war hawks used anger over British impressment of U.S. sailors, and the negative effect on U.S. trade.

On June 1, 1812, President Madison presented a list of grievances against Great Britain to Congress. Aware of the delicate separation of powers outlined in the Constitution, Madison placed the decision in the hands of the Congress. Madison and his cabinet believed that war with Great Britain was necessary, yet Madison was aware of how divided the country was on the subject. He also knew that the future of the Democratic-Republican party depended on its ability to make a broad national appeal. The debate in Congress would be of critical importance to the nation's future. Congress faced fundamental issues involving war and peace, as well as the U.S. relationship with Eu- rope in general and Great Britain in particular. While a range of opinions existed, four principle options had emerged by June 1812.