

Chapter 50. Relations With Britain Reach A Breaking Point (1809-1811)



A British Soldier

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Time: March 1809 to September 1811

Madison Is Twice Manipulated Over His Trading Policy

Madison comes into office still believing that access to trade with America will be enough of a bargaining chip to stop British and French interference with U.S. ships and sailors.

The Non-Intercourse Act of March 1, 1809, he inherits bans trade with both combatants – but also opens the door to resumption, should either nation declare its intent to end future aggression.

Over the next year, both will manipulate Madison and his diplomats into believing they are complying with America's wishes.

The British take this tack immediately. On April 19, 1809, the British minister, David Erskine, tells Secretary of State Robert Smith that the Crown will no longer interfere with American ships at sea. Madison takes this at face value, and re-opens American trade with Britain.

On August 9, however, he learns that Erskine's assurance to Smith was not "official" British policy, and so he reinstates the Non-Intercourse ban.

Ten months later, Napoleon steps up the heat on America in his March 23, 1810, Rambouillet Decree, saying that France will seize and sell all American ships it encounters.

The next move belongs to Madison. On May 1, 1810, he seeks reconciliation with both nations in passage of the so-called "Macon's Number 2 Bill," named after its sponsor, Nathaniel Macon, a House member from North Carolina.

This bill seeks a return to normalcy, re-opening trade with both France and Britain.

But with one caveat. Madison still wants public confirmation that interference with American ships has been “officially prohibited” – and he offers a “carrot” aimed at getting his way. Should either Britain or France openly announce a favorable change in policy, American will resume the trade embargo on its opponent.

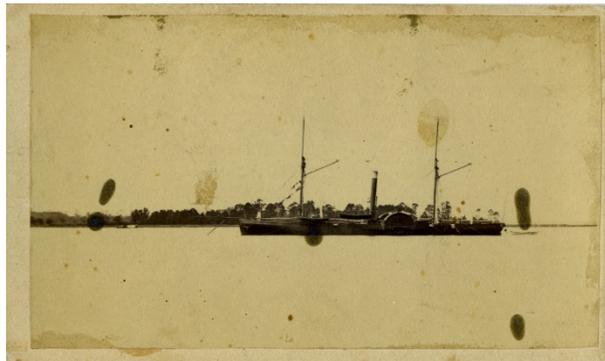
Now it is Napoleon’s turn to manipulate Madison. On August 5, 1810, he instructs his foreign minister to tell the Americans that he will renounce future interference with shipping, if they will cut off trade with Britain. At the same time, he secretly orders the seizure of all American ships now in French harbors.

Madison naively takes Napoleon at his word, and, when three months pass without a corresponding message from Britain, he declares on November 2 that shipping to England will end, effective on March 2, 1811.

This enrages the British, who announce plans to step up their impressment activities and even blockade the port of New York.

Time: May 1-16, 1811

Naval Battles Amplify War Fever



An American Warship

Two back-to-back naval clashes now increase tensions with Britain.

The first occurs in New York Bay, south of lower Manhattan.

On May 1, 1811, the frigate *HMS Guerriere*, with its 38 cannon and crew of 350 men, comes upon the *USS Spitfire*, a sloop sporting three guns and some 20 sailors, off Sandy Hook, New Jersey. The *Spitfire* is stopped and boarded, and an American-born seaman, sailing master John Diggio, is impressed.

The second incident, on May 16, involves bloodshed.

The American navy now has its guard up as the frigate *USS President* encounters what it erroneously believes to be *HMS Guerriere* off the coast of North Carolina. An exchange of fire follows, with the two sides disagreeing on who shot first. The British ship – which turns out to be the 18 gun sloop, *HMS Little Belt* – suffers 11 killed and 21 wounded in the battle.

Relations with Britain will never recover from these incidents.

Both occur at a time when U.S. Ambassador William Pinkney has already departed for a visit home, leaving a void in diplomatic relations in London.

At the same time, Napoleon continues to have his diplomats reassure a new U.S. Ambassador to France, Joel Barlow, about his peaceful intentions toward America

Time: November 7, 1811

Harrison Defeats Tecumseh At The Battle Of Tippecanoe



The Attack on Harrison's Camp West of Prophetstown

In addition to the confrontations at sea, suspicions grow that British Canadians are building alliances with native tribes along the northern border to impede westward settlements.

Going all the way back to 1794, the burden for handling Indian affairs in the Northwest Territory has fallen on the shoulders of William Henry Harrison, son of the former Virginia Governor, Benjamin Harrison V.

His army career includes numerous battles on the frontier, and involvement in a series of negotiations leading to often forced cession of tribal lands to the United States.

In 1799, at age 26, he is elected to represent the Northwest Territory in the 7th U.S. Congress. His friend, Secretary of War, Thomas Pickering encourages John Adams to name him Governor of the Indiana Territory in 1801. Jefferson keeps him on because he seems willing to help the tribes learn agriculture and to become assimilated peacefully. Over time his land negotiations lead to adding millions of acres from Ohio to Wisconsin.

Some Of The Indian Land Cessions Negotiated By William Henry Harrison

Year	Treaty of:	Main Tribes	Land Ceded to U.S.
1795	Greenville	10 tribes together	16.9 million acres, Ohio + strip west to Chicago
1804	Vincennes	Miami and Shawnee	1.6 million acres in central Indiana
	St. Louis	Fox and Sauk	5.0 million acres in Wisconsin
1809	Ft Wayne	Delaware and Miami	3.0 million in eastern and western Indiana

Of course the very notion of “owning land” remains foreign to the Indians – and resistance to these cessions builds as white settlers begin their occupation. In the Great Lakes region, it is the Shawnee Tribe that fights back most aggressively. They are led by the charismatic shaman, Tenskwatawa, called The Prophet, and his older brother, Tecumseh.

Tecumseh realizes that promises of support for native peoples from “the Great Father” in Washington always vanish when the time comes to deliver,

In July 1811, he begins to organize a confederation of tribes intent on driving the white men out and restoring the Indian traditions and way of life. In turn, they tell Harrison that the Ft. Wayne cession is invalid, and that they intend to fight for the land.

They also signal that their cause is being supported by British allies in Canada.

To prepare for battle, Tecumseh gathers some 5,000 warriors on Miami land in Indiana, near the confluence of the Tippecanoe (“buffalo fish”) and Wabash Rivers. This site is called “Prophetstown” by Harrison, and he sets out with a force of 1,000 troops to conquer it, in September 1811.

On November 6, 1811, he encounter a tribal delegation near Prophetstown under a flag of truce. At the time, Tecumseh is in the southwest, attempting to recruit more support from the Cherokees. The two sides agree to meet again the next day.

Instead, at 4AM on November 7, the Indians initiate a surprise attack behind The Prophet on Harrison’s camp, huddled just east of Burnett Creek. The battle rages for two hours, with the American falling back initially, and suffering heavy casualties. But unlike Tecumseh, Tenskwatawa is more the religious leader than the warrior. So Harrison rallies his troops, breaks out of his initial trap and eventually burns Prophetstown to the ground.

This victory at Tippecanoe will insure national fame for William Henry Harrison as a frontiersman who has successfully defeated both the hostile tribes and their British allies.

The truth is much more modest than the legend. Actual losses for each side total only 100 fighters, and the outcome does little to divert Tecumseh and his band from continuing to attack white settlers in the region.

Another two years will pass before Tecumseh’s confederation is finally subdued for good, at the Battle of the Thames, Harrison’s true landmark victory.

Time: June 4, 1812

Congress Declares War On Britain

Tensions with Britain continue to build after the two naval encounters in May and the Tippecanoe battle in November, 1811.

At this point Madison is being carried along by calls for war with Britain emanating from the public, the politicians and his generals.

His new Secretary of State, James Monroe – appointed April 2, 1811, after Robert Smith is ousted – is a former front line officer and combatant in the Revolutionary War, and ready to take on the British again.

He is joined by two new members of the House, Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun, who together rally a faction in Congress known as the “Warhawks.”

If Britain is not only threatening U.S. shipping, but also encouraging Indian resistance, then America surely needs to respond with force.

As always, when conflict with Britain arises, special attention is focused on Canada.

Many see the continued presence of the British along the northern border as “unfinished business” from the Revolutionary War. They inhibit the growth of America’s fur trading industry, provoke tribal resistance on the frontier, and present an invasion threat by garrisoning troops across forts along the border.

This threat becomes even more real throughout the winter and spring of 1812 by importation of British regulars and stepped-up recruiting of local militia across Canada.

On April 10, 1812, Congress also gives Madison authority to call up to 100,000 troops from state militias, should the need arise.

American and British diplomats attempt to search for peaceful ways out, but the sticking issue always comes back to impressments. Britain says that it must continue to retrieve its nationals serving on American ships in order to win its naval battles with the French. As much as Madison wants to believe that American commerce is worth more than impressed sailors, this is never the case with the British.

By now, public opinion has swung almost entirely away from the one policy espoused by every president from Washington through Madison – that of maintaining “neutrality in foreign conflicts” and avoiding what Jefferson called the non-productive costs associated with war.

War (is) but a suspension of useful works, and a return to a state of peace, a return to the progress of improvement

The only remaining opposition to war lies with the New England merchants, who regard the prospect as even more fatal to their business prospects than the Jefferson-Madison embargos.

Finally the time for compromise runs out. On June 1, 1812, acting in accord with the Constitution, Madison goes to Congress and asks them to declare war against Britain. His principal reasons why include: ongoing impressment of seamen; blockades against American shipping; confiscation of ships; and incitement of the Indian tribes in the Northwest territories.

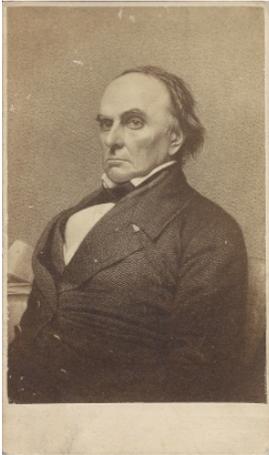
The actual voting, however, is hardly unanimous. The House supports the war measure by 78-45; the Senate is much closer, with passage by only 18-13. The outcome is determined on June 4 along party lines – with no Federalists supporting the President.

Conjecture remains about exactly why the Democratic-Republicans – so viscerally anti-war by nature – come around in favor of taking on the powerful British once again. Perhaps the most likely explanation lies in the lingering wish to remove Britain from Canada once and for all. This and a belief that an inland war could be won easily and quickly, while America’s navy was now strong enough to hold its own against the British fleet, in battles close to home.

With passage of the bill, the War of 1812 is about to begin.

Time: July 4, 1812

The Federalist Daniel Webster Attacks Madison's Decision And Preparedness



Daniel Webster

New England looks for a powerful spokesperson against the war, and they find one in the Federalist, Daniel Webster, a 30 year old lawyer from New Hampshire, who is on his way to becoming a major political figure in Washington over the next four decades.

On July 4, 1812, in a speech to the Washington Benevolent Society, Webster assails the President for leaping blindly into a very dangerous war the nation is ill prepared to fight.

In what will become his usual dramatic fashion, the speech begins by citing the seriousness of the hour, the wisdom of Washington in regard to avoiding warfare, and the woeful lack of preparation for battle.

In an hour big with events of no ordinary impact we meet. We come to take counsel of the dead...to listen to the dictates of departed wisdom. We are in open war with the greatest maritime power on earth. This is a condition not to be trifled with.

Washington embraced competent measures of defence, yet it was his purpose to avoid war. Would to God that the spirit of his administration might actuate this government.

With respect to the war, resistance and insurrection can form no part of our creed. The disciples of Washington are neither tyrants in power, nor rebels without. We are yet at liberty to lament the commencement of the present contest.

We believe that the war is premature and inexpedient. Our shores are unprotected; our towns exposed. It exceeds belief that a nation thus circumstanced should be plunged into sudden war.

He cites the damage to the US economy likely to follow from the conflict.

The voice of the whole mercantile interest is united against the war. We believe that it will endanger our rights, prejudice our best interests.

Also that, in opposing Britain, America would be strengthening Napoleon's forces, which might soon be redirected against America.

Nor can we shut our eyes to the prospect of a French alliance. That we should make common cause and assist her to subdue her adversary and to extend her chains and despotism over the civilized world seems to be a dreadful departure from true wisdom and honest politics. French brotherhood is an idea big with horror and abomination. What people hath come within the grasp of her power and not been ground to powder?

He closes by calling upon the sons of new England to stand up against support for war and for France.

But if it be in the righteous counsel of heaven to bury New England, her religion, her governments, and her laws under the tyranny of foreign despotism, there are those among her sons who will never see that moment.

They cannot perish better than standing between their country and the embrace of a ferocious tyranny. At the appointed hour, they shall, for the last time, behold the light of the sun not with the eyes of slaves or as subjects of an imperious despotism.

Indeed, time will show that while Madison believes an easy victory will follow, he has failed woefully to prepare a military force sufficient to carry the day.

The U.S. Army numbers only 12,000 Regulars; so much of the fighting will depend on often poorly trained state militias. The U.S. has the largest “neutral” fleet in the world, but it will be no match for the Royal Navy. And since Congress has shut down the US Bank, his access to funding the war is constrained.

Fortunately for Madison, the British are similarly ill-equipped to fight.

In June 1812 the bulk of their ground forces are attacking the French in Spain, under the future Duke of Wellington. Only 6,000 red coats have been left behind in North America to defend various Canadian forts. Likewise the British navy has its hands full trying to enforce the blockade of cargoes flowing into France.

Time: July 12 – August 16, 1812

The War In Western Canada Begins Badly



The War of 1812 Begins Along the Canadian Border

As in 1775 war with Britain, America assumes that a quick strike into Canada will succeed, and perhaps even cause the British to back away from further fighting. As Jefferson says:

The acquisition of Canada this year will be a mere matter of marching.

So the battle begins, with the opening gambits along the western edge of Lake Erie and north into Lake Huron.

Things immediately go badly for the US forces.

On July 17 a contingent of 200-300 British and Indian warriors land on Mackinac Island and surprise Lt. Porter Hanks and the American troops garrisoned at Ft. Michilimackinac – who surrender post haste on the belief that they are badly outnumbered. Soon after two U.S. sloops are also taken when they come into port believing that the fort is still in friendly hands. Porter is subsequently court marshalled for cowardice, but is killed by a British shell while still under arrest.

Command of the “Army of the Northwest” lies with Brigadier General William Hull, a Revolutionary War veteran praised by Washington, and presently Governor of the Michigan Territory. But Hull is 59 years old, and has tried, unsuccessfully, to avoid the “offer” from Secretary of War Eustis to return to combat.

When Hull learns of the Mackinac Island debacle, he fears that Ft. Dearborn in Chicago may also be attacked and overrun. He orders the immediate evacuation of the fort. On August 15, some 66 soldiers and 27 women and children evacuate under a flag of truce, only to be set upon by Potawatomi warriors who kill over half of the Americans and capture the rest.

While these two reversals are occurring, General Hull and 2,500 troops are preparing to invade Canada along the western edge of Lake Erie. On July 5, 1812, Hulls sets up camp at Ft. Detroit. One week later he crosses the Detroit River, and issues a proclamation meant to scare his opponents into submission:

INHABITANTS OF CANADA: After thirty years of peace and prosperity, the United States have been driven to arms. The injuries and aggressions, the insults and indignities of Great Britain have once more left no alternative but manly resistance or unconditional submission. The army under my command has invaded your country. The standard of the union now waves over the territory of Canada. To the peaceful and unoffending inhabitants it brings neither danger nor difficulty. I come to find enemies, not to make them; I come to protect not to injure you ... I have a force which will break down all opposition, and that force is but the vanguard of a much greater. If, contrary to your own interest, and the just expectations of my country, you should take part in the approaching contest, you will be considered and treated as enemies, and the horrors and calamities of war will stalk you.

Once on Canadian soils, Hull sends our various probes that encounter resistance from a mixture of British regulars, local militia and various tribesmen, notably Tecumseh.

By August 9, the set-backs convince Hull that he cannot advance into Canada without more troops and cannon, and he retreats back over the river to Ft. Detroit.

By now, however, the British are ready to go on the offensive and chase him. They assemble a force of some 300 Regulars, 400 militia and 600 Indians at the Canadian town of Amherstburg, then head out after Hull and his remaining 2200 men at Detroit.

The red-coat commander, Major General Isaac Brock, decides to bluff Hull into believing he is surrounded by overwhelming opposition. His dispatch to Hull also raises the specter of uncontrollable slaughter waged by his tribal bands:

The force at my disposal authorizes me to require of you the immediate surrender of Fort Detroit. It is far from my intention to join in a war of extermination, but you must be aware, that the numerous bodies of Indians, who have attached themselves to my troops, will be beyond control the moment the contest commences...

On August 15, Brock fires on the fort, using the few cannon at his disposal, along with support from two Royal Navy sloops on the nearby river. One day later he follows up with demonstrations, led by Indian war whoops intended to spook the Americans.

These succeed immediately. Hull has his daughter and grandchild in the fort, and fears repeat of the slaughter at Ft. Dearborn. He asks Brock for three days to arrange for surrender; Brock gives him three hours.

When news of the capitulation at Detroit reaches Washington, Hull is arrested and his command is handed to William Henry Harrison. A subsequent court martial sentences Hull to death, but his sentence is commuted by Madison, in light of his long service during the Revolution and his advanced age.

All of these setbacks – Mackinac, Ft. Dearborn, Detroit – occur as the two parties pick their candidates for the election of 1812.