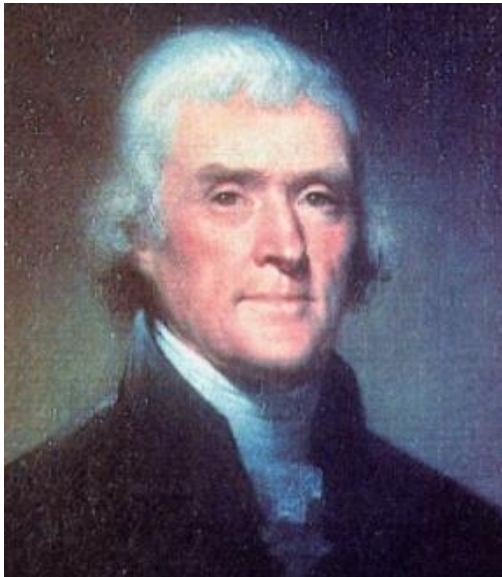


The Making of a Nation – Program No. 34

Thomas Jefferson, Part Five: Jefferson Suspends Trade with Europe

From VOA Learning English, welcome to The Making of a Nation, our weekly program of American history for people learning English. I'm Steve Ember.

Last time, we talked about the presidential election of 1804. Thomas Jefferson, the nation's third president, was easily re-elected. Jefferson was



head of the Democratic-Republican Party, known today as the Democratic Party.

Thomas Jefferson had a very good record during his first term as president. He ended many taxes. He paid government debts. And he gained possession of the huge Louisiana Territory from France without going to war.

His political opponents were the Federalists.

The Federalists were sure Jefferson would win the election of 1804. Still, they were surprised by the strength of his victory.

Jefferson won 162 electoral votes. His Federalist opponent won just 14.

In the early 1800s, Britain and France were at war with each other. The United States remained neutral.

Historian Andrew O'Shaughnessy says President Jefferson did not want to become involved in a war.

"He was sufficiently pro-French that he didn't want to ally with the British, but not so pro-French that he wanted a war with the British."

Jefferson also believed getting involved in a European war would destroy all the progress he had made at home. His economic policies had helped to pay much of America's national debt. And he was able to reduce taxes.

But staying neutral was not easy. The United States was having trouble with Britain.

For many years, Britain had been taking men by force to serve in its navy. Britain claimed the right to seize any British citizen, anywhere. The custom was called impressment.

Conditions in the Royal Navy were not good at that time, and many sailors deserted. Some went to work on American ships. The American ships were stopped and searched in British waters. Anyone born in Britain was seized. Historian Andrew O'Shaughnessy says sometimes American citizens were also taken.

"There was also still something of an imperial attitude in Britain toward America. They were still insisting that some American citizens had been born British. It was often difficult for them to be able to distinguish between their

own subjects and Americans.”

Several thousand sailors were taken off American ships during the early 1800s.

In 1807, an incident made relations between Britain and America even more tense. Britain believed that four of its sailors had deserted and fled to an American ship called the Chesapeake. The United States said the men were American citizens who had been forced to serve in the British navy. The United States refused to return them.

When the Chesapeake sailed out of American waters, the British ship Leopard tried to stop and search it. The American captain would not stop. First the British ship fired two warning shots. Then it fired all its guns directly at the Chesapeake. The American ship could do little to defend itself. The captain surrendered.

News of the British attack spread quickly. President Jefferson ordered all British navy ships in American waters to leave at once. He told people not to aid the British. He said any person — American or British — who disobeyed his orders would be arrested.

In response, the British government announced a new rule. It said any American ship sailing to Europe must stop first in Britain to get permission. Ships violating the rule would be seized. Relations between the two countries were reaching the breaking point.

Impressment was just one of the major problems the United States was having with Britain in the early 1800s. Another problem was trade.

Britain wanted to stop the United States from trading with France and its colonies. British warships blocked the port of New York all through 1805. No American ship could leave without being searched. Any ship found to be carrying goods for France was taken north to Halifax, Nova Scotia. There, a British court had the power to seize the goods and force the ship's owners to pay a large fine.

In the closing days of 1807, President Thomas Jefferson signed a bill banning all trade with Europe. No ships could enter or leave the United States. Jefferson did not believe that trade embargoes were the best way to settle America's problems with other nations. But at the time, he thought an embargo was the only way to deal with Britain and France, short of war. And he did not want war.

Jefferson later explained why he thought the embargo was the best choice of action.

He said if American ships had sailed out of American waters, they would have been seized by Britain or France. That would have forced the United States into war. Jefferson said it was far better to stop all contact with these nations until they returned to some sense of justice.

Jefferson acted to protect American traders, ship owners and sailors. Yet those were the people who protested the loudest against the ban. They were willing to take the chance of having Britain or France seize their ship and goods. They could not make any money without trade.

The situation quickly turned into a political battle between the Jeffersonian Republicans and the opposition Federalists.

Federalist newspapers attacked Jefferson. They called him a tool of France and its leader. They charged that Jefferson supported the trade ban to help Napoleon Bonaparte.

One Federalist senator wrote a pamphlet against the embargo. He urged northeastern states to refuse to enforce it. Then he went even further. He met secretly with a British official who was sent to Washington to discuss the situation. He told the British official that Jefferson would be forced out of office because of the embargo.

Jefferson simply wished to give the trade embargo a fair chance. He considered the embargo less evil than war. *But after a time, he thought, this will not be so. If the war should continue in Europe, and if Britain and France continue to act against us, then it would be for Congress to say if war would not be better than the embargo.*

Jefferson hoped that the loss of American trade would force Britain and France to change their policies toward the United States. And he hoped the change would come quickly. He knew that the American people would not accept a long ban on trade.

A British traveler visiting New York City described what the embargo had done. *The port is full of ships. But all of them are closed. Only a few sailors can be seen. Many of the counting houses are closed. The coffee houses are almost empty. The streets near the water are almost deserted. Grass has begun to grow upon the docks.*

America's northern industrial states felt the loss of trade most deeply. But the agricultural South also was affected. Rich southern farmers and planters suddenly found themselves poor.

Tobacco was one of their major crops. And Britain bought more American tobacco than any other country. Because of the embargo, the price of tobacco fell so low that it had almost no value. The price of wheat fell from two dollars a bushel to seven cents a bushel. Good farmland dropped in value until it was worth almost nothing. Opposition to the embargo was growing.

The opposition was strongest in the Northeast. Ship owners and traders believed that the embargo was wrong. They continued to export goods secretly.

Some traders began sending goods over land to Canada. From there, the goods were sent on to Britain. Congress passed a law against this kind of trade. But the shipments did not stop. Too many people were willing to violate the law for the large amounts of money they could make by trading secretly with Britain.

By August 1808, Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin had lost all hope that the embargo would be successful. Gallatin told President Jefferson that the embargo was defeated by open violations.

Another of Jefferson's supporters gave the president some advice: *If the embargo could be enforced, and if the people would accept it, then I am sure it would be the wisest course. But if it cannot be enforced completely, and if the people will not accept it, then it will not serve its purpose and it should not be continued.*

Jefferson, however, was not ready to give up his plan. In his last State of the Union message to Congress, he painted a bright picture of the nation.

He reported that American industry was making progress. Many goods that had been imported before the embargo were now being made at home. He said almost all of the national debt had been paid. And he said more than 100 gunboats had been built — enough, he declared, to defend the country.

Jefferson said nothing about opposition to the embargo. Nor did he talk about the serious economic problems caused by it. He said only that Britain and France still refused to honor American neutrality, and so the embargo must continue.

The rest of the nation was not so sure. Congress began debating a number of proposals to either lift or amend the embargo. In the first months of 1809, Congress finally approved a bill. The bill lifted the ban on trade with all European countries except Britain and France.

Jefferson had hoped to continue the embargo a little longer and with more powers to enforce it. He was not satisfied with the final bill. But he signed it anyway on March 1. Three days later, the 15-month-old embargo was dead. And the United States had a new president.

The election of 1808 and Jefferson's final days as president will be our story next week.

I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us each week for The Making of a Nation — our American history program from VOA Learning English.