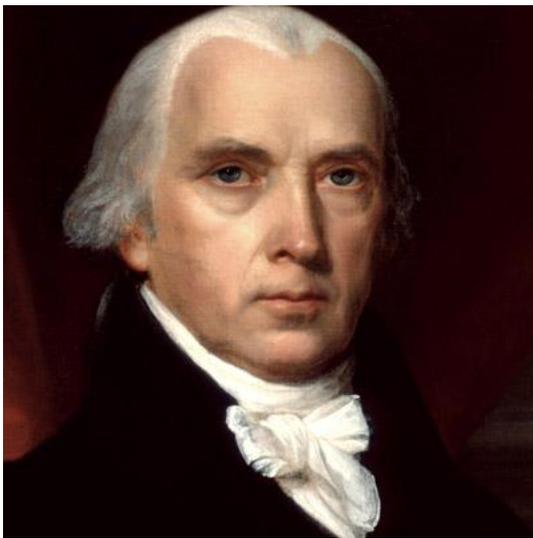


The Making of a Nation – Program No. 36

America's Tense Relations with England Erupt into the War of 1812

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.



James Madison of Virginia was elected president of the United States in 1808. He was inaugurated in Washington on March 4, 1809.

The people of the city were happy with the new president. But the nation was not yet sure what kind of leader he would be.

Madison's first four years were not easy. He had to deal with a foreign policy problem that the former president, Thomas Jefferson, was not able to solve: increasingly tense relations with Britain.

Historian Alan Taylor has written several books on early American history and has won a Pulitzer Prize for his writing. He says Madison took office under difficult circumstances.

“Jefferson in many ways was a tough act to follow because he’d been extraordinarily popular. But he’d made one great policy mistake with Madison’s support. Madison had been his secretary of state. And that mistake was something known as the embargo.”

The embargo had arisen from a war between Britain and France. The two nations refused to honor America's neutrality. Each tried to prevent the United States from trading with the other. Both interfered with American shipping. And the British navy sometimes seized American sailors.

President Jefferson ordered a ban on trade with Europe. But the embargo failed to end the hostile acts against the United States.

A month after Madison took office, the British minister in Washington, David Erskine, said Britain would stop seizing American ships if the United States would trade again with Britain. But Erskine did not make clear that the British government demanded several conditions.

One condition was that the United States continue the ban against trade with France. Another was that Britain be permitted to capture American ships that violated the law.

President Madison did not accept these conditions, but he still believed he had reached an agreement with the British minister. He announced that the United States would re-open trade with Britain. Hundreds of ships left American ports. But a few weeks later, Madison received surprising news. The British government had rejected the agreement he reached with Erskine.

Letters were exchanged. But Madison could not get a good explanation for what had happened. He finally broke off all communications, and Erskine and his replacement left Washington.

America's policy of trade with Britain and France continued to be a serious issue. President Madison approved trade with all countries in 1810. But when relations with Britain did not improve, he stopped trade with the country again in the spring of 1811.

Trade was not the only problem, however. A growing number of Americans believed that the British were helping some Native Americans to fight the United States.

As the people of the United States began to move to the northern and western territories, the government made treaties with the different Indian tribes. The treaties explained which land belonged to the Indians and which land could be settled by white people.

The settlers did not always honor the treaties.

Historian Alan Taylor explains that Indian tribes were trying to defend their homelands. He says they asked the British to provide them with guns and ammunition to fight against the American settlements.

“The British were playing a very ambivalent game. In other words, they wanted to keep the Indians on a kind of retainer in the eventuality that war did happen, they would want to mobilize those Indians. So they did provide them with guns and ammunition, but they hoped that the native peoples would just use them on the defensive.”

A leader of the Shawnee Indian tribe, Tecumseh, decided to unite all Indians and help them defend against the settlers.

Throughout the West, many Americans believed that the British in Canada were responsible for Tecumseh's efforts. They demanded war with Britain to destroy the power of the tribes.

In Washington, a new Congress was meeting. Some of the new members were very different from the men who had controlled Congress before. They were less willing to compromise, and more willing to defend America's interests. They soon got the name "War Hawks."

At the same time, America had a new secretary of state. Madison chose his close friend, James Monroe.

What the United States did not have at that troubled time was a representative in Britain. The British minister in Washington, Francis James Jackson, returned to London when Madison broke off communications. The American minister in London, William Pinkney, sailed home as well.

There was no official in either capital to report what was happening. And in the spring of 1812, the United States and Britain were moving closer to war.

President Madison had hoped for some sign of compromise. But he was sure there would be war. He had seen the instructions from London to Britain's new minister in Washington, Augustus Foster. The foreign minister warned Foster to say nothing about any compromise. He wanted the United States to see how firmly Britain would stand against neutral trade with its enemies.

Also, historian Alan Taylor says the United States did not believe Britain would stop inspecting American ships and taking away any sailors the British thought were British subjects.

“And because the British would not change that policy, the United States was determined to force them to change that policy. That’s why the war happened.”

In the United States, Congress continued to prepare the nation for war. Lawmakers voted to increase the size of the army and to borrow money to pay for things the larger army would need.

But not all lawmakers wanted war with Britain. Many Federalists, especially, opposed it.

Congressman Hermanus Bleecker showed the House a list of hundreds of names from his area of New York. He said all these people opposed the embargo and the idea of war with Britain. It is impossible, he said, that we can go to war when the embargo ends, 60 days from now. Where are our armies? Our navy? Have we the money to fight a war? Why, it would be treason to go to war this soon, so poorly prepared.

Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin was having a difficult time finding money to borrow. He could get almost no money at all from Federalist bankers in the New England states in the Northeast. Congress had approved borrowing \$11 million. But Gallatin found the banks would lend only \$6 million to the federal government.

The Federalists charged that Gallatin's difficulties showed that the people did not want war, especially the people of New England. If the people of the West and the South wanted to fight, then let them pay for the war.

Yet, sure that Britain would not change its hostile policies, President Madison sent a secret message to Congress on June 1, proposing that war be declared. Madison listed the reasons for war:

British warships had violated the American flag at sea. The British navy had seized and carried off persons protected by the flag. British warships also violated United States waters, interfering with American ships as they

entered and left port. Another reason, he said, was Britain's orders against trade with France or allies of France.

International law, he said, gave Britain no right to make such orders.

Madison also spoke of the hostile Indians of the northwest territory, and seemed to charge British Canada with helping the Indians.

The president's message went to the Foreign Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives for discussion. The final vote in the House on declaring war was 79 for and 49 against. In the Senate, the vote was closer: 19 for and 13 against.

President Madison signed the bill into law on June 18. The War of 1812 had begun.

The leaders in Washington did not know it, but two days earlier Britain had ended its orders against neutral American trade. The orders might have been withdrawn earlier, except for a number of events.

British Prime Minister Spencer Perceval, under great political pressure, had decided to end the British orders on neutral trade. Businesses and traders were loudly protesting that the orders were destroying England's economy. On May 11, before Perceval could act, he was shot to death. Not until June 8 was agreement reached on a new prime minister, Lord Liverpool.

Eight days later, his government announced that the orders were ended immediately. This was only two days before war was to be declared in

Washington. And, with ships being the only method of communication, the British action was not learned of in time.

If the United States had had a minister in London during the spring of 1812, the diplomat would have been able to report progress toward ending the orders. But the American minister, William Pinkney, had returned home a year earlier.

Neither Americans nor British were sure they wanted war, even after it was declared. The public's reaction 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 series from VOA Learning English.