

## **The Making of a Nation – Program No. 37**

### **James Madison Part 2 - Madison Declares War on Britain in 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.

The United States declared war on Britain in 1812. It did so because Britain refused to stop seizing American ships that traded with France—Britain's enemy in Europe. Sometimes there were also seizures of American sailors. These seizures were known as impressment.

Britain finally suspended its orders against neutral trade, after a change in government. But the British acted too late. The United States had already declared war. Today, we continue the story of the War of 1812.

Most of Britain's forces were battling the soldiers of Napoleon Bonaparte in Europe. Historian and Pulitzer Prize winner Alan Taylor says that, as a result, the British could send only a small force to the United States.

“And so the British were basically fighting the war against the United States on the defensive in Canada, while trying to raid the American coast using their advantage in the more powerful Royal Navy.”

For its part, the United States was far from ready to fight. The United States had not fought a war, or needed an army, for a long time. There were only 8,000 American soldiers. The soldiers who were young knew little about war. And the officers who knew about war were old enough to have led troops in

the American Revolution.

President James Madison named two top generals: 62-year-old Henry Dearborn and 63-year-old Thomas Pinckney.

The United States had only a few warships and gunboats with which to face the British navy—the most powerful naval force in the world.

Historian and professor Alan Taylor says the American people were divided about the war.

“A majority of them supported the Madison administration, and agreed that they tried the embargo and it failed, and that something had to be done because national honor, they felt, was at stake. And that they needed to stop the British practice of impressment. And they were also upset about the British military aid to these Indian peoples who were restricting American expansion.”

Alan Taylor says for those reasons, many Americans supported the war, particularly in the southern, western and mid-Atlantic states.

“But in New England most of the people supported the opposition party, the Federalists, and they were very bitter about the war. They felt that it was really being waged for illegitimate reasons, that diplomacy could have just papered over the disagreement over impressment. And so they did their best to obstruct the war effort. They not only didn’t want to contribute to the war effort, but they wanted to block it as best they could.”

Church bells were rung and flags were lowered in New England when the declaration of war was announced.

There was also the problem of getting enough men to serve as soldiers. Congress had approved an increase of 25,000 men. Only 5,000 agreed to serve. Members of Congress from the western states had spoken proudly of how their people would rush to fight the British. This did not happen. The first request to Kentucky for soldiers produced only 400 men.

Historian Alan Taylor says that some states in the Northeast did not offer any soldiers at all, especially for invasions into Canada.

“And even when the governors would cooperate, as did for example, the governor of New York, the militia would often march to the border and then decide that their constitutional duty was only to defend their state and not help the United States invade another country. And so they’d go on a sit-down strike once they got to the border.”

Nevertheless, an American general named William Hull led 2,000 men across the Canadian border. But the British general there was prepared, and the attack failed. Although Hull had the stronger force and plenty of supplies, he retreated to Detroit. He was chased by a smaller force of British soldiers and Indians.

After the war, Hull was tried by a military court on charges of cowardice. The court found him guilty and ordered him shot. But president, because of Hull's service during the Revolutionary War, permitted the old soldier to live.

The next American attack was made from Fort Niagara, a military post in New York on the shore of Lake Ontario. A small group of American soldiers crossed the Niagara River and attacked the British. But some Americans from New York refused to cross the border to help against the British. They calmly watched as British soldiers shot down the attacking Americans.

The third campaign was made by General Henry Dearborn. He led a state militia force from Plattsburgh, New York, to the Canadian border. He was planning to cross the border and attack Montreal. But again the soldiers refused to cross the border. Dearborn could do nothing but march them back to Plattsburgh.

British forces at this time were winning victories. They captured an American fort in northern Michigan. And Indians — fighting for the British — captured a fort at the place now known as Chicago.

Instead of marching through Canada without difficulty, the Americans found themselves trying hard to keep the British out of the state of Ohio.

For a while, the small American Navy was doing better than the Army.

Just two months after the war started, the United States warship Constitution forced a British ship to surrender. Several months later another American ship, the Wasp, captured the British ship Frolic. Then a frigate named the United States defeated one of Britain's most famous fighting ships, the Macedonian. The British ship was captured and brought to the United States.

There were other victories at sea. At the end of six months, the United States Navy had captured six British ships and lost only one of its own vessels.

Private American trade ships had been armed with guns when the war started. They, too, were successful against the British. They captured more than 300 British trade ships.

But the American successes forced Britain to bring more of its fighting ships into the war with the United States. By the middle of 1813, a year after the war started, British ships controlled the East coast. No American ship could enter or leave any port south of New England.

Meanwhile, the military situation was improving for the Americans in what was then the West. William Henry Harrison, governor of the Indiana territory, formed a large force to try to capture Detroit from the British. At the same time, Captain Oliver Perry built five warships on Lake Erie. With these, and four he already had, Perry met and defeated a British naval force.

Perry reported his victory to Harrison: "We have met the enemy, and they are ours."

Perry's victory and Harrison's large force caused the British to withdraw from Detroit and from a British fort at Malden, in Canada. Harrison's men continued to chase the enemy. They caught them and defeated them in the battle of the Thames. Killed in this battle was the great Indian chief Tecumseh, who had been fighting for the British.

American forces made new attempts to win control of Lake Ontario and invade Canada across the Niagara River. But none of these succeeded. Late in 1813, British soldiers crossed the river and captured Fort Niagara. They also burned the town of Buffalo.

By April 1814 Napoleon was forced from power in Europe. And the war between France and Britain was over. The end of the war in Europe permitted Britain to send many of its soldiers to fight against the United States.

About 4,000 British soldiers landed on the Chesapeake coast, southeast of Washington. They met American forces inland at Bladensburg, a town 10 kilometers from Washington. The British soldiers broke through the American lines, and the Americans began to run away.

But a group of sailors refused to retreat with their artillery. Commanded by Joshua Barney, the 400 sailors chose to stand and fight. The struggle did not last long against the 4,000 British soldiers.

Barney held his position for a half-hour before enemy soldiers got behind his men and silenced their guns. Barney was wounded seriously. The British thought so much of his courage that they carried him to a hospital for their own soldiers at Bladensburg. Barney himself said the British officers treated him as a brother.

Once the British troops had smashed through Barney's Navy men, nothing stood between them and Washington.

The commanders of the British force, General Robert Ross and Admiral George Cockburn, took a group of men to the Capitol building and set fire to it. Then the two commanders went to the White House with the same intention.

Before setting fire to the president's home, Cockburn took one of Madison's hats and the seat from one of Dolley Madison's chairs. The admiral found the president's table set for dinner. As a joke, he took a glass of wine and toasted the health of "President Jemmy."

President Madison had fled the White House. He crossed the Potomac River and started toward his home in Virginia. He joined his wife on the road the second day. They decided to wait about 25 kilometers from Washington.

When President Madison returned to the capital three days later, the British had withdrawn. They had also burned most public buildings.

The British coastal force next attacked the city of Baltimore. The story of that battle, and the song it inspired, will be our story next week.

I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us again next time for The Making of a Nation – American History from VOA Learning English.