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The Challenge

Britain Against America in the Naval War of 1812

ANDREW LAMBERT

From the author of Nelson and Admirals comes an exciting naval history of Britain's other conflict in 1812 – with the American navy.

In the summer of 1812 Britain stood alone, fighting for her very survival against a vast European Empire. Only the Royal Navy stood between Napoleon's legions and ultimate victory. In that dark hour America saw its chance to challenge British dominance: her troops invaded Canada and American frigates attacked British merchant shipping, the lifeblood of British defence.

War polarised America. The south and west wanted land, the north wanted peace and trade. But America had to choose between the oceans and the continent. Within weeks the land invasion had stalled, but American warships and privateers did rather better, and astonished the world by besting the Royal Navy in a series of battles.

Then in three titanic single ship actions the challenge was decisively met. British frigates closed with the Chesapeake, the Essex and the President, flagship of American naval ambition. Both sides found new heroes but none could equal Captain Philip Broke, champion of history's greatest frigate battle, when HMS Shannon captured the USS Chesapeake in thirteen blood-soaked minutes. Broke's victory secured British control of the Atlantic, and within a year Washington, D. C. had been taken and burnt by British troops.

Andrew Lambert, Laughton Professor of Naval History in the Department of War Studies at King's College London, brings all his mastery of the subject and narrative brilliance to throw new light on a war which until now has been much mythologised, little understood.

'One of the most eminent naval historians of our age.'
Amanda Foreman

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The Challenge

America, Britain and the War of 1812

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Introduction

Every nation needs a history, a unifying narrative that explains and justifies the present.

This book is about a war and the way it became part of two very different narratives. Wars have been a central concern for historians for close on three thousand years, their causes, conduct and consequences conveying everything from divine judgement to moral lessons. In a crowded field the War of 1812 occupies a curious position. Although often referred to by Americans as a victorious 'Second War for Independence', it is also considered a success north of the border, where a very different view of the outcome has helped shape Canadian identity. In Britain, 1812 is the year Napoleon marched to Moscow; the war with America is a long-forgotten sideshow. The British define the very essence of 'Britishness' by reference to another, contemporaneous conflict, one in which they fought for their very existence against the greatest military genius of the modern age.

In June 1812 the United States, not yet fifty years old, challenged the greatest naval and economic power of the time, invading Canada and attacking British ships. It would be a curious war, fought in the shadow of a far greater conflict. At first the British simply did not believe that the Americans meant to fight about issues of principle, issues which they had no hope of upholding. Eventually they accepted the need to respond, but only after Napoleon began his terrible retreat from Moscow. Eighty years later a great American historian gently reminded his fellow citizens that the War of 1812 had been a disaster; after a litany of defeats all along the Canadian border, the capture and destruction of Washington, bankruptcy and the loss

of several warships, including the national flagship; the peace settlement had been a fortunate escape.[1] This begs the question: how could a defeated nation, one that suffered such devastating losses, declare a victory and remain in occupation of the literary battlefield for two centuries?

The answer lies in the smokescreen of words that obscured American aims and objectives throughout the conflict. President Madison went to war demanding that Britain end the practice of stopping and searching American merchant ships and impressing seamen on the high seas. Yet these aims were not even mentioned in the treaty that ended the war; the peace process was dominated by questions of land and the rights of Indians. While this mismatch between rhetoric and reality was hardly unusual, examining British war aims and strategy reveals a very different war. Both sides considered the war in the context of the European conflict. In the summer of 1812 Napoleon was about to invade Russia with over half a million men. The American administration expected that Napoleon would win. They planned to seize British North America – modern Canada – and hold it while Napoleon defeated the British. Former President Thomas Jefferson expected that the Canadians, anglophone and francophone alike, would be happy to join the American Republic, indeed Jefferson opined that conquest would be 'a mere matter of marching'. Instead, invading American armies were repulsed by a handful of British regulars, Canadian militia and their Indian allies.

In fact the only battles the Americans won in 1812 were at sea, despite the Republican administration effectively ignoring the Navy. In three frigate actions that year substantially larger American ships captured smaller, less powerful British opponents. Desperate for good news to bolster their flagging grip on political power, the Republican Party latched on to the sea of glory, claiming these victories had been won in fair and equal combat, and linked the claim to the idea that war had been declared as response to British treatment of American ships and sailors. In reality the seafaring communities of New England

and New York, who suffered most from pre-war British actions, consistently voted against war, a fact which reinforces the charge of partisan opportunism. War was popular with Republican voters in the agrarian Central Atlantic states, and especially in the West, because it offered a golden opportunity to seize land from the British and the Indians.

Although the war would drag on until the end of 1814, its outcome was decided by the failure of the American army to conquer Canada, the defeat of American attacks on British merchant shipping and a devastating British economic blockade that left America bankrupt and insolvent. In case anyone in America had missed the utter helplessness of their government, 4,000 British troops captured and burned Washington DC. The Presidential mansion, where the decision for war had been taken, was one of the public buildings to be torched. In the rebuild it acquired a coat of whitewash. The idea that the British 'lost' the war – in which they secured their war aims by compelling the Americans to stop invading Canada, destroyed their capital city and reduced them to insolvency in the process – is one that requires explanation.

This book examines the origins, conduct and consequences of the war from a British perspective, focusing on the development of policy and strategy in London and the conduct of war at sea. Not only has the war on the Canadian border been studied in depth by some outstanding scholars, but it was, for all the bloodshed and chaos, a strategic stalemate. Early British victories on land blunted the American offensive; American naval victories on Lake Erie in 1813 and Lake Champlain in 1814 restored the balance. British amphibious operations, from Maine to New Orleans, a mix of triumph and disaster, are equally well-known, if less well understood. The decisive theatre was the American Atlantic coast and oceanic sea lanes, where the Royal Navy's North American Squadron defeated the United States Navy, and blockaded the American coast. The American attack on commercial shipping failed and instead most American warships were blockaded in port, leaving the entire coast open to

economic and amphibious attack. As Napoleon wryly observed, the Americans had 'not yet succeeded in seriously disturbing the English'. He expected they would do better in the future.[2]

Most accounts of the naval war focus on the three small-scale, intense combats of 1812 and the lives of the American heroes who won. The other three frigate battles of the war tell a very different story. On 1 June 1813 HMS *Shannon* captured the USS *Chesapeake* off Boston in less than fifteen minutes, in an action of ferocious intensity, fought with astonishing skill and courage on both sides. On 28 February 1814 HMS *Phoebe* took the USS *Essex* at Valparaiso, Chile, in a strikingly one-sided action. Finally, on 14 January 1815, the USS *President* was taken off Sandy Hook by HMS *Endymion* in a pursuit battle that pitted the American flagship, and the American naval hero, against a smaller British opponent. After the Americans surrendered, two more British ships came up to stop the *President* escaping – just as President James Madison had fled the scene at Bladensburg only months before. Re-examining these actions, and the way they have been represented in British and American literature, demonstrates that the American victory was internal. This was a war for cultural identity and cultural independence, one that created a continental America focused on land and expansion. And it did so without reconciling the sectional interests or cultural divisions of North and South, thereby setting the scene for an altogether greater catastrophe half a century later.

This book is about events that occurred 200 years ago, and their contemporary resonance. I have attempted, as far as possible, to allow those who took part to speak for themselves, and in their own language. Of late it has become standard practice to refer to ships and nations as neutered, as it. The men and women of 1812 did not see the world in this way; for them ship was she because it was living thing, a sensibility that Byron expressed in the immortal line:

> She walks the waters like a thing of life,
> And seems to dare the elements to strife.[3]

The same held true for the liberal nations involved in this conflict, invariably represented by Britannia or Columbia, armed and dangerous female embodiments of a tradition stretching back to the war goddess Pallas Athene. I have retained this usage, both in quotations and in the text, because it would be absurd to make the romantic heroes of 1812 speak the language of another age, one that has little comprehension of their mental world, their values or their culture.

It is important, lest anyone confuse the point, to stress that reconsidering an old war fought by brave men with pre-industrial warships and weapons has little to do with winning or losing, and less with old notions of right and wrong. This book examines how the past has been created, and why. It ceased to matter who 'won' the War of 1812 over a century ago, when America, Britain and Canada recognised the need to work together to address far greater threats. What matters now is that we recognise the past as an evolving cultural construction. In this respect art and literature did more to make our War of 1812 than cannon and diplomacy. Modern versions of the war still reflect agendas developed to serve the political interests of the men who waged the war. These became enmeshed in emerging national identities in North America, becoming central to the self-image of modern states. Little wonder much of the discussion is handled in emotive terms.

Anxious to secure re-election, the governing Republican Party declared a victory and adopted the ever-victorious *Constitution* as the flagship of their war. In the ultimate act of cultural construction a single successful ship was deployed to disguise a failed war. While the British soon forgot 1812, they retained enough relics of glory to subvert American claims. Every time an American president used memories of 1812 to threaten Canada, the British backed their diplomacy with warships called *President*, *Chesapeake*, *Shannon* and *Endymion*, because they knew the difference between propaganda and power. These symbols worked because the relationship between Britain and

America reflected the lessons of war. After 1815 the United States fortified the coast from Maine to the Mississippi against the Royal Navy. The real result of the war was a century of peace that segued almost seamlessly into co-operation and alliance, as the three nations worked together to defeat more fundamental threats in the twentieth century. That they did so with a clearer sense of what they shared than what they did not may be the ultimate legacy of 1812.

CHAPTER 1

Flashpoints

Early on Monday 22 June 1807 the United States frigate *Chesapeake*, 36 guns, sailed from Chesapeake Bay, heading for the Mediterranean, where Commodore James Barron would take command of the small American squadron. With America at peace with the world the *Chesapeake* was heavily loaded with stores, and the new crew had not been drilled for battle. Master Commandant Charles Gordon, *Chesapeake*'s captain, planned to work the ship into fighting order as they crossed the Atlantic. By mid-afternoon *Chesapeake* had left the inland waters, passing two British warships at anchor in Lynnhaven Bay, and Gordon set his men to work, preparing for the open sea. Observing a ship closing from astern at 3.30 p.m., Gordon backed sails, slowing down to speak with HMS *Leopard*. Captain Salusbury Humphreys, acting under specific orders from Admiral Sir George Cranfield Berkeley, Commander-in-Chief on the North American station, sent an officer on board the *Chesapeake* to demand the return of several British sailors who had deserted from the Royal Navy, and enlisted on the American ship.

This was unprecedented, and illegal. Barron rightly refused to comply, only for the 50-gun *Leopard*, significantly more powerful than the American ship, to close in and open fire. Humphreys knew the Americans were in no position to fight, 'the ship being much lumbered', and few of her 36 guns had been secured on their carriages. Finally Lieutenant William Henry Allen brought a live coal up from the galley and fired a single gun, allowing Barron to haul down the national colours and signal surrender after making a token resistance. Three men were dead, and sixteen wounded. Barron offered to surrender his

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ship, but this was politely refused. Instead British officers came aboard, mustered the crew and took four known deserters, John Strachan, Daniel Martin, William Ware and John Wilson. They were not the only Britons on board, merely the ones who could be positively identified. One man, known to the Royal Navy as Jenkin Ratford, a British-born deserter, had publicly abused British officers ashore at Norfolk only days before. He would be hanged. While the other three were also known deserters, two were black, and the nationality of all three was sufficiently doubtful to ensure they were merely imprisoned.

The *Chesapeake*, her rigging shredded, several feet of water in the hold, her crew utterly demoralised, limped back into home waters, anchoring at Hampton Roads shortly after noon the following day.[1] Humiliated and anxious about their careers, the ship's officers turned on Barron. They requested that he be arrested and tried for dereliction of duty. In the heated atmosphere of a dangerous international confrontation American naval officers were anxious to preserve their collective reputation. They aspired to an international code of honour, and to match the professional standards set by the Royal Navy. This self-proclaimed elite group were proud, yet anxious, many having their image captured for posterity in the full uniform of gold lace, high collars and epaulettes that demonstrated rank and status.[2] Already at odds with the Republican administration, the officer corps feared that the disgrace of the *Chesapeake* might lead to further cuts and loss of status.

The administration and the Navy Secretary had equally good reasons to seek a scapegoat. They were responsible for the feeble state of national defence at sea. When a court of enquiry in October found Barron guilty of negligence and want of judgement a full court martial was inevitable. In January and February 1808 eleven senior officers of the tiny American service gathered on board the *Chesapeake*. Captain John Rodgers was appointed president of the court; only a few years before he had blustered about fighting a duel with Barron, a man he publicly blamed for a litany of slights and insults. Captain Stephen

Decatur had relieved Barron in command of the *Chesapeake*, forming such a low opinion of Barron's conduct that he begged to be excused from the court. The request was refused. The month-long trial proceeded with all the stiff decorum required to preserve the tattered dignity of a deeply embarrassed service. John Rodgers asked a handful of questions, each one carefully calculated to reveal that the ship had not been ready for action. Master Commandant David Porter, a friend of Rodgers and Decatur, focused on the demoralising effect of Barron's supine conduct.[3] Rather harshly found guilty of 'neglecting on the probability of an engagement to clear his ship for action', Barron was suspended from all duty without pay for five years. Mortified and humiliated, Barron would bear a grudge against those who passed that judgment for the rest of his long life. Never again would he command an American warship, even when his country went to war. Nor was he alone in his despair. The tiny, fractious naval officer corps had been dangerously divided by the judgment – Barron's trial and those of the *Chesapeake*'s other officers led directly to three duels, one of which proved fatal.[4] During his years of disgrace Barron earned his bread in merchant shipping. In 1813 he offered his services, an offer that was pointedly ignored.[5]

The shock and humiliation that followed the return of the shattered American frigate to port quickly turned to widespread anger, and direct action against British sailors and stores on shore at Norfolk, Virginia. Yet President Thomas Jefferson preferred a more measured response. He had no intention of going to war with Britain, and by omitting any mention of desertion, the issue that caused the incident, tacitly recognised that the Navy had been unwise to recruit British deserters. Rather than pick a fight Jefferson merely demanded an official explanation, using the distance between Washington and London to cool tempers. The only direct action he took was designed to avoid further friction, denying British warships access to American waters, other than in an emergency. His October Message to Congress harnessed public anger to support his preferred defence preparations: a

fleet of gunboats to defend American harbours, ordered only months before.[6]

Yet there were deeper trends in Jefferson's thinking. That July he told the French Ambassador:

If the English do not give us the satisfaction we demand [over the *Leopard–Chesapeake* incident], we will take Canada which wants to join the Union, and when with Canada we shall have the Floridas, we will no longer have any difficulty with our vessels, and this is the only way to stop them.

John Armstrong, the American Ambassador in Paris echoed the thought.[7] Behind Jefferson's carefully contrived rhetoric of outrage lay a deep-seated ambition to make America a continental nation.

In stark contrast, the British response to the *Leopard–Chesapeake* incident was muted. Whatever the legality of the case – and few doubted the Royal Navy had breached international law – most supported Berkeley's action. British seamen were being lured into American service so the chastisement had been necessary. Furthermore, the Admiral was well connected on both sides of the political divide. As the British government reflected on the incident the deciding consideration would be news from Europe. Well aware of the mood at home, Berkeley expected orders to attack New York. Time was of the essence: the Americans were 'hard at work fortifying their harbours' and calling on the exiled French General Moreau for advice, and perhaps to command the army. Berkeley warned the ministers that the Americans would trifle with them until their defences had been put in order, and their merchant ships had returned home.

If I had a few more ships, I certainly should be tempted to run up to New York with the squadron before the harbour is secured and wait there for the issue of negotiations, as having that city under the terror of destruction would insure a favourable issue to any terms you might propose.

As New York Customs provided two-thirds of American state revenue, an attack would be decisive. He reckoned that with four

more battleships, two bomb vessels, four large frigates, and six or eight gun-brigs he could 'compel them to any treaty'. After the initial strike he advised exploiting the 'reciprocal hatred' of the Northern and Southern states to split the Union. With a larger squadron and 5,000 soldiers in fast transports he could keep the whole American coast in a state of alarm, bringing them to terms in six months once the revenue fell and taxes rose. The pre-emptive seizure of American merchant ships would cripple the privateer threat before war began.[8]

As Berkeley implied, the early history of Anglo-American relations could be read in the solid angular form of the bricks and stones that formed the coast defence of the new republic. Americans looked to land-based artillery to secure their harbours. New forts were begun in 1794, in case the French Revolutionary War spilled across the Atlantic. Most were simple earthworks, armed with any available cannon. More money was spent during the Quasi-War of 1798–1800, when masonry works like Fort McHenry at Baltimore were constructed. After the *Chesapeake* incident 'the remarkable total of more than three million dollars' was spent. New York and its approaches received more attention than any other harbour, with several new works, including Fort Wood, now the base of the Statue of Liberty. Fort Columbus and Fort Williams on Governor's Island mounted up to 100 guns each; others closed off the narrows. Most American ports had at least one fort by 1812.[9] America feared British naval power.

THE CONTINENTAL SYSTEM

The only problem with Berkeley's incisive strategic analysis was the assumption that Britain, fighting for her very survival in Europe, had an element of choice. The government in London let Jefferson procrastinate and dissemble because Britain simply did not have the men, ships or money to begin another war. Anglo-American relations in this period were dominated by the Napoleonic War, a truly existential conflict that raged across

Europe and the wider world between 1803 and 1815. Britain and France were absolutely focused on a struggle for survival that would only end when one state had been utterly defeated, and its political system annihilated. In this world at war it would have been remarkably naïve for American statesmen to think that the rights and safety of neutral ships that voluntarily sought to profit from the conflict would receive favourable attention from great empires at war. That Jefferson relied on economic suasion to make his case only reinforced the apparent naïveté. American commerce stood to lose far more in a war with Britain than it suffered as a neutral from France and Britain combined. In truth American statesmen were not fools; they saw a quarrel about maritime trade and neutral rights as an ideal opportunity to acquire land, and rearrange domestic politics.[10]

War created opportunities for American expansion. When Napoleon's 1802 campaign to re-conquer Haiti failed he realised that his entire New World portfolio was severely devalued. A hasty, opportunistic sale turned the indefensible territory of Louisiana into ready money, which he used to rebuild his navy to fight Britain, the only state that still defied him. Lord Nelson's sublime victory at the Battle of Trafalgar, 21 October 1805, settled the command of the sea, confining Napoleon to Europe. His global ambitions thwarted, Napoleon turned on Europe, conquering Spain, Italy, Holland and much of Germany. By 1806 he had destroyed nations and shattered the European political system, creating a monstrous super-state that he ruled as the self-crowned Emperor of France and King of Italy.

While Nelson became the war god of the British state, his protégés translated the command of the sea secured at Trafalgar into a powerful strategic tool, enabling Britain to fight for survival against a military colossus with close on a million men under arms. Relying on economic warfare and naval blockades, the British slowly but surely broke the French economy, fostering unrest among subject states and peoples, funding and supporting any who took up arms for their own liberation. They were altogether less friendly to opportunistic neutral traders.

After Trafalgar, the greatest land and sea powers of the age settled into a curiously bloodless conflict, waged by customs houses and patrolling cruisers. In May 1806 a British Order in Council placed the European coast between Brest and the Elbe under blockade, strictly enforced between the Seine and Ostend, the invasion ports. Outside this narrow strategic zone, ships coming from neutral ports were allowed to pass. The object was to destroy French coasting trade, and stop neutrals from carrying French colonial produce to metropolitan France. One side effect was to alienate the United States, which was carrying much of France's West Indian trade across the Atlantic. Jefferson retaliated with the Non-Importation Act of October 1806, which banned British imports. His futile, self-defeating gesture assumed the British would change their grand strategy to suit the economic interests of a minor neutral nation.[11]

In November 1806 Napoleon celebrated his newly won control of Germany by issuing the Berlin Decree, the founding charter of a Continental System designed to exclude British commerce from Europe. Napoleon demanded that Britain abandon the legal regime it had employed at sea for generations, which made the private property of enemy citizens liable to seizure. He knew the British would not surrender this principle short of total defeat.[12] The deeper aims of the System have been widely debated, but the results were clear: it turned Europe into an economic satellite of France, funding Napoleon's military occupation of the continent. The Berlin Decree had far less effect on Britain than on occupied Europe. On the same day, Napoleon ordered the occupation of several German ports, and demanded Denmark cut communications with Britain and demobilise.[13] The Decree also violated French treaties with the United States. Together with the British Orders in Council that followed on 7 January 1807, the Berlin Decree raised the level of economic warfare.[14] The British were trying to cut France's coasting trade, and exclude neutral ships from that trade. Neither Britain nor France achieved decisive results. However, a long war would be advantageous for Britain, which was far better organised for economic war than

France. Superior fiscal systems, public credit and access to long-term loans at lower rates of interest allowed Britain to pay for her war. Napoleon funded his by plunder, forced contribution and the blatant exploitation of his satellite states. During the war London replaced Amsterdam as the world's major money market. Smuggling and new markets helped to lessen the effect of the Continental System on Britain. France simply passed the cost of war on to her conquered territories, using the Continental System as a tool to extend Napoleonic imperium.

Furthermore, the Berlin Decree was something of a dead letter while Russia remained independent, and free to trade with Britain. They were put on hold when a Russian army fought Napoleon to a standstill at Eylau in February 1807. The British began to hope that Russia could distract Napoleon from the sea. Instead, a Napoleonic thunderbolt crushed their feeble hopes. News of the decisive battle of Friedland, 14 June 1807, reached London on the 30th, 'melancholy intelligence' officially confirmed on 10 July. In defeat Tsar Alexander adopted an anti-British tone that King George III found 'very discouraging'.[15] After Friedland, Alexander signed up to Napoleon's system: France and Russia would close the European continent against British business, coercing the last neutrals into the system.

Britain could not afford to sit back and wait for these measures to take effect, or to ignore the longer-term threat posed by Napoleon's fleet-building plans. Effective strategy responds by countering threats, and whenever possible seizing the initiative.[16] Now entirely alone, Britain's only hope of survival lay in the active, aggressive pursuit of a maritime war, using the sea to build economic power while the blockade degraded that of Europe. As Nelson had predicted, a strict blockade of Europe made the inhabitants feel the baneful effects of French fraternity, and rise up in revolt.[17] In any event the British had few strategic options.

The first victims of the economic total war were neutral shipping nations, primarily the United States. For Napoleon, neutrality was not an option. Everyone would have to take sides. For some, like Denmark, that choice would be taken for them;

for others, like the distant United States, the problem would lead to endless debate, frequent legislative change and ultimately an ill-timed war.

When the London *Times* published news on 17 July of a negotiation between Napoleon and Tsar Alexander, the King's Private Secretary pointedly observed: 'We shall again have to carry on the war single handed and I trust we have nothing to dread whilst we continue at open war with those scoundrels.'[18] At the Treaty of Tilsit, signed on 7 July, the two emperors agreed to act together against Britain. This was a dangerous game for Alexander; the Continental System looked remarkably like the last Russian economic war against Britain, which had ended with the murder of his father in 1801. Russia could not afford to wage economic war against Britain; and nothing had changed in the interval. Yet Tilsit committed Russia, and France would now attempt to coerce Denmark, Sweden, Austria and Portugal to make war on Britain. The object of the exercise had become clear on 4 July, when Napoleon bragged: 'Everything points to the continental war being at an end. Our whole effort must now be thrown on the naval side.'[19]

The only common ground between the two emperors was hatred of Britain. While Russia remained hostile, Britain had no hope of defeating Napoleon. Under the cloak of a war against Britain Napoleon completed the conquest of Europe by stealth. The logical conclusion of the process would be a single pan-European empire, and there was no doubting which emperor would rule. That such a state posed a fundamental threat to Britain's security, because it could mobilise massive naval resources, was perfectly clear to Napoleon, and to the British. That Britain responded by attacking the smaller powers at the margins of the conflict, denying Napoleon the first fruits of Tilsit, was no more than sound policy.[20] Fortunately the British government had been hoarding money and manpower against just such an eventuality, using them in a ruthless, dynamic, devastating amphibious operation against Denmark. As Foreign Secretary George Canning observed:

> We have now, what we had once before and once only in 1800, a maritime war, in our power – unfettered by any considerations of whom we may annoy, or whom we may offend – And we have . . . determination to carry it through.[21]

No longer obliged to debate strategy with allies, Britain would make war in her own, unique way. Canning, like Nelson, looked forward to a time when Europe would rise up and overthrow the dictator. British strategy, based on naval mastery, would secure Britain and her global trading network. Sea control for economic advantage and strategic effect provided the bedrock of British policy; any state challenging that control would find itself at war.

Between Trafalgar and Tilsit British governments had struggled to find a strategy to counter the dynamic expansion of the Napoleonic empire. After Tilsit Britain relied on sea control and economic pressure. A war of money and cruisers might appear indecisive and amateurish alongside Napoleon's titanic campaigns, but it worked.[22] British ministers understood that 'the naval strength of the enemy should be the first objective of the forces of a maritime power, both by land and sea'.[23] That concept underpinned everything successive British governments attempted between 1805 and 1815; it explained Copenhagen, the Peninsular War, and the refusal to compromise with the United States.

News of the Russian defeat at Friedland persuaded the Cabinet to recall and promote George Berkeley, rather than applying further pressure on Washington.[24] Berkeley's suggestion that an attack on New York might be the best way to resolve the impasse was no flight of fancy. The British sent a massive task force to Copenhagen, seizing the Danish capital and taking away the entire fleet and everything of value from the dockyard. The British also persuaded the Portuguese king to abandon Lisbon, then menaced by a French army, and re-establish his dynasty in Brazil.[25] After these stunning successes had re-drawn the basic architecture of the Anglo-French war, Canning hoped the Americans could be brought to reason without relaxing the contentious Orders in Council. Delighted by the deterioration of Anglo-American relations, Napoleon stepped up his seizures

of American shipping, unable to resist the temptation of easy pickings from a trade that America could not protect.[26]

MONEY, LAND AND HONOUR

British decision-makers knew, despite the heated rhetoric surrounding the *Leopard–Chesapeake* incident, that the fundamental issues dividing the two countries were economic and territorial. The United States that emerged from the Revolution of 1776 had a population well under four million, a fifth of them slaves. Only 200,000 people lived in large cities; the great majority were engaged in farming, fishing and forestry. It took the new country half a decade to establish a central government, and economic growth remained slow, crippled by a tiny domestic market and the vast distances between population centres. Only coastal and river transport could move bulky agricultural produce to market. Extensive barriers faced American exports and shipping, barriers imposed by all European powers to protect their colonies from competition. American industrial output was minimal. While Britain remained the main trading partner, exports to Britain were significantly lower than they had been before the Revolution. For obvious reasons the British Navigation Laws, designed to protect the British economy and secure a steady supply of sailors for the Royal Navy, gave preference to loyal Canadian and West Indian suppliers, closing inter-colonial trades to American ships. These trades had been the basis of American economic development before 1776. The British government's tough policy was supported by powerful East and West India shipping, colonial and political interests, which controlled a major segment of the House of Commons. British merchants favoured excluding American shipping to protect their own profits. The government listened because those merchants paid the taxes that sustained the state.[27]

Before 1793 there was 'no significant alteration' in American 'carrying trade and exports'.[28] British economist Lord Sheffield publicly condemned any concessions. He anticipated a prolonged

period of economic dependence, America remaining a British colony on an 'informal' basis, without the costs of government and protection, rather than the costly 'formal' model. America would serve British commercial interests, increasing British shipping and the strategically vital pool of skilled ocean-going seamen needed to defend the state in time of war.[29] He was right: without significant capital, or many banks, America was an economic dependency. The most obvious American growth area was the agricultural population. With an open frontier, population growth fuelled expansive land hunger, rather than providing cheap labour for industrial development.

America's grim economic prospects would be transformed by the French Revolutionary War. Between 1793 and 1801 the value of American exports and carrying trade earnings increased five times and, after a brief fall caused by the Peace of Amiens in 1801–3, reached a peak in 1807. This was 'primarily a result of the rapid development of the re-export trade'. While exports doubled, re-exports increased by 200 per cent, quickly overtaking domestic-sourced exports in value. Re-exports were foreign cargoes that stopped in American harbours long enough to be classed as American, usually unloading and reloading, before continuing to their original destination. Under this system, American ships carried French goods to France's West Indian colonies, and returned to France laden with Caribbean crops, all despite the British blockade and the annihilation of French merchant shipping. Revenue from shipping services was another major growth area. American freight rates peaked in the late 1790s, just as the Royal Navy cleared European shipping from the seas, leaving European colonies in America, Africa and Asia without commercial transport. American economic growth depended on the European conflict.[30] As the British took control of the oceans, French, Dutch and Spanish colonies, cut off from their homelands by Royal Navy cruisers, resorted to neutral shippers. Suddenly the Americans were allowed into markets that had been closed against them, generating remarkable economic growth.

The meteoric expansion of American oceanic shipping followed the protectionist tariff of 1789, designed to defend domestic shipping routes, and promote overseas commerce. The tariff enabled American shippers to undercut foreign competition, primarily because the next two decades would see every other major shipping nation involved in catastrophic wars. Within a decade 90 per cent of the oceanic shipping using American ports was American.[31] Even allowing for the distraction of Europe this was highly inequitable. One result of this rapid 'artificial' expansion was that half of all skilled seafarers on American ocean-going ships were foreigners. Most were British. Relying on British seafarers at a time when Britain was engaged in an existential conflict risked serious political repercussions; American statesmen chose to complain about the British response, and ignore the root cause. British seafarers powered the expansion of American shipping, the engine of the American economy.[32]

By 1807 the growth of American trade had begun to stall: colonial markets were in decline – the British had seized the most significant French and Dutch colonies, while Spain, soon to be paralysed by a French invasion, left her colonial ports open to British trade. Opportunities for American commercial expansion would have to be sought in more contentious European waters.

ECONOMIC WAR

Napoleon's attempt to defeat the 'nation of shopkeepers' in an economic war between Europe and the British Empire placed America in the firing line. Until then American merchants had used their neutral status to make a fortune out of the conflict. Between the outbreak of war in 1793 and 1807 annual exports increased from $23 million to $108 million, imports (for consumption not re-export) from $32 million to $85 million. Expanding shipping and shipbuilding, the growth of export industries, banking and the extension of agriculture profited large sections of American society. The first American millionaire was a New England ship-owner, and such wealth began to shape American culture.

If the British laughed at American cultural pretensions, the profits of trade did not pass unnoticed. Britain, by a large margin America's best trading partner, began to question American commercial methods. The argument was simple: American ships were carrying French, Spanish and Dutch goods between their colonies and Europe, a trade closed to American ships by the laws of those states in peace. Under the Rule of 1756 the British maintained that any trade closed in peacetime could not be opened in war. Well aware of British law, and the Royal Navy's power to enforce it, Americans off-loaded such cargoes in American ports, paid a nominal duty and then re-loaded them as re-exports.

In a carefully calculated move to pressurise Washington to conform to their views, the British banned the re-export trade. The High Court of Admiralty's *Essex* judgment of 1805 upheld the Rule of 1756, declaring the ship had 'touched in America solely to colour the true purpose', carrying goods from Spain to Havana. This 'fraudulently circuitous voyage' vitiated the ship's neutrality. Ship and cargo were condemned.[33] Lord Sheffield agreed, confident the Americans would not 'deem it expedient' to resort to war; 'a sensible people, not easily diverted from a consideration of their own interests', they recognised no action they might take could compensate for the loss of trade 'and the consequent embarrassment and distress of their maritime towns, in which is centred the greater part of their population, power and wealth'.[34] As a member of the Board of Trade from 1809, Sheffield hardened ministerial attitudes against concession to America.[35] His colleagues included the Prime Minister, the First Lord of the Admiralty, the Secretaries of State for Home and Foreign Affairs, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Speaker of the House of Commons, while the Presidents of the Board after 1806, Lord Auckland, Earl Bathurst and Lord Melville were intimately involved in defence, war and empire.[36] Sheffield's belief that economic coercion would force America to accept British practice suggests he had fundamentally misunderstood the United States. He still saw America as a maritime state, but

the brief ascendancy of an American seafaring, commercial culture, based on the major port cities of the Atlantic coast, had already begun to fade. America was assuming a new identity.

THOMAS JEFFERSON

At the heart of the growing Anglo-American divergence lay the mind and measures of Thomas Jefferson, third President (in office 1801–9), intellectual, statesman and ideologue of Republican America. Jefferson shaped every aspect of American policy during his Presidency and turned convenient co-operation towards blood-stained confrontation, and his decisions reflected a clear ideology. Where John Adams's Federalist administration (1797–1801) worked with the British when the interests of the two states coincided, Jefferson was profoundly hostile to Britain, the British, and their system of government. After the traumatic experience of being ignored in 1776, Jefferson spent the rest of his days dividing America from Britain. During the Presidential election campaign of 1800 he used explosive rhetoric to charge his Federalist opponents with treasonous intent, and subservience to the old country. He showed no interest in building domestic consensus, preferring confrontation to compromise, pitting the sectional interests of Virginia, his home state, against Federalist New England, repeatedly arguing that political difference was a form of treason. Alongside the elevated sentiments and intellectual insight, Jefferson was, at heart, authoritarian and anti-democratic. The Republican Party was the state; those who held different views were traitors. Not that Jefferson held an elevated notion of the political morality of any party. 'They' threatened to wreck 'his' vision, and must be stopped. The trend towards totalitarianism was clear. In stark contrast to the Anglo/Dutch democratic tradition, driven by the growing cosmopolitan political body to evolve a flexible system of government to share power and compromise, Jefferson drew his politics from Rousseau, who provided little support for practical politicians. Critically, Jefferson tried to recreate

Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States, 1801–9, ideologue and leader of the Republican Party.

an idealised Roman Republic, where political virtue was linked to stable agrarian interests, the unchanging rhythm of planting and harvesting, the natural deference of peasant toward master, and the untroubled possession of slaves. Desperate for stability and control, Jefferson tried to preserve his idealised, virtuous pre-industrial society, only to find that progress and change were incessant, nowhere more so than in America. His fixed Constitution only worked while the country remained exactly as it had been when the document was framed.

Jefferson's political creed made him fear the dangerous concentration of peoples in cities, which replicated the uneven division of wealth and power at the heart of 'Old World' politics. He feared urban mobs, created by manufacturing industry, as

'sores' on the body politic.[37] The danger of foreign influence and political corruption was clear, and the infection was spread by men of commerce: 'Foreign and false citizens now constitute the great body of what are called our merchants, fill our sea ports, are planted in every little town.'[38] He was especially fearful of major port cities, preferring small ports that could be dominated by inland producers, a perspective that ignored the history of commercial and civic development since the dawn of time. Ports connected America to the corruption of Britain, a conduit for dependence and re-conquest. In 1803 Jefferson dismissed the politics of commercial cities as noisy, but inconsequential, contrasting their vicious, foreign influences with the national virtues of the countryside.[39] He had little faith in the political morality of Yankee merchants and shippers, largely because they were Federalists, convinced that their greed made them easy prey to external interests. The only safe course, as he revealed in 1807, would be to close down commercial intercourse, and force the New Englanders back to tilling their stony fields.

Recognising the vulnerability of American shipping to British naval power, Jefferson would be prepared to compromise during the *Leopard–Chesapeake* crisis of 1807; Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin stressed to him that few places on the coast were safe from British raids, including Washington.[40] While Gallatin advised a pre-emptive strike to seize the British naval base at Halifax in Nova Scotia, Jefferson settled for economic coercion. At first glance such measures appeared futile – how could they protect American ships and commerce from the impact of a titanic struggle that had raged across much of the world for a dozen years? – but the reality was altogether more sophisticated.

In a total war 'neutrality' would only be possible on absolute terms, the complete cessation of all economic intercourse with both belligerents. Much as the idea appealed to Jefferson's agrarian hemispheric nostrums he could not impose such a regime. Too many prominent men made their living in shipping and overseas trade, too much of the national income came from customs dues, and too many seats would be lost at the next election if trade

were blocked. The initial attempt to resolve this dilemma was a measure that neither solved the problem nor pleased the people. The 'Non-Importation' Act of April 1806, revealingly timed to take effect in November, after that year's shipping season had ended, attempted to apply economic pressure on London, by banning British imports. Non-importation was more of a shot across the bows than a direct hit. It left the trade to run for another year, and did not stop the importation of key British goods. While the British considered the measure an insult, it was harmless. In April 1807 Rear Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane advised the First Lord of the Admiralty that non-importation would make the American populace 'disaffected to their Government, which will pave the way for the long expected separation of the Northern from the Southern States, an event which cannot be at a great distance – happen when it may, it must be for the advantage of Great Britain'. Cochrane warned that were Britain to 'submit to American encroachments . . . our Navy will be ruined, and our trade greatly injured'.[41]

Seemingly oblivious to the importance of the Royal Navy to Britain, and the impossibility of manning it without impressment, Jefferson linked non-importation to a demand that Britain cease impressing seamen from American ships. But in the meantime James Monroe and William Pinkney had led a high-powered American diplomatic mission to London, and by the end of 1806 had negotiated realistic solutions to the issues of trade and impressment. In return for legalising the re-export trade, the treaty would have tied America to the British maritime economy, a profitable, secure position, although sacrificing a certain amount of dignity. The British were even prepared to ameliorate the impact of impressment.[42] Jefferson simply refused to put the document before Congress. He did not want a settlement: simmering Anglo-American antagonism served his domestic agenda, polarised American politics, and broke links to the corrupting sea and the Old World beyond.[43]

The opportunity was fleeting; when Napoleon's Berlin Decree stepped up the economic attack on Britain the British responded.

James Monroe, Republican diplomat,
Secretary of State and Secretary for War.

Fresh Orders in Council on 7 January 1807 prevented any ships from trading between ports under Napoleon's control.[44] Since 1803, 731 American merchant ships had been seized by Britain and France, roughly two-thirds by Britain. As the conflict built up to a denouement such losses would only increase. Britain blocked all trade with ports that were closed to British ships; Napoleon's Milan Decree responded by making any ship that passed through a British port liable to seizure as 'British'.

If the economic damage was limited to American trading communities, normally beyond Jefferson's concern, the issue of impressment had the power to shock an entire country. Under British law all British seafarers owed a duty to the Crown, and

they could be forcibly impressed into the Royal Navy on the high seas, as well as in British ports. Americans believed that large numbers of American-born sailors were being impressed. In fact rather less than 10 per cent of the American maritime workforce suffered this fate.[45] Furthermore, as Jefferson, Madison and Gallatin soon discovered, American economic expansion depended on British skilled labour. A project to surrender all British sailors in American ships in return for the British ending the impressment of Americans was quietly dropped because half of all skilled seamen in American merchant ships were British.[46] No more than half the men impressed from American ships were actually Americans.

BETWEEN THE MILLSTONES OF WAR

Before Trafalgar, Jefferson seriously considered building an ocean-going fleet, including battleships, as a balancing lever for the international system. After Trafalgar, the British controlled the seas more completely than ever before and, in the absence of allies or armies, used sea power to wage total economic war against France. Jefferson shifted his attention to a force of coastal gunboats. Predictably these failed to satisfy the navalist interests of New England merchants, emphasising the sectional divide.[47] In reality the gunboat navy was built to enforce Jefferson's preferred diplomatic tool, blocking exports of supposedly vital produce from America, and the import of British manufactured goods.

In December 1807 Jefferson unveiled his response to the *Leopard–Chesapeake* incident. The Embargo Act reached Congress before official notification of the British Orders in Council had reached Washington. The Act blocked the American export trade and came into effect only days after Napoleon's Milan Decrees. To punish Britain Jefferson made war on American merchants. The results were disastrous: economic hardship obliged American merchants and seafarers to smuggle, and the New England states, whose ships and men were directly

affected by British actions, moved decisively into the Federalist camp. After the Act a merchant community that had funded national warships to defend commerce in 1797–8 systematically broke the law, while the Navy they had helped to create was used to enforce a deeply unpopular measure. Widespread resistance to Federal Law weakened the Union, and caused a dramatic fall in customs revenue, the key source of Federal funding.[48] Not only was 1808 the only deficit budget of the era, but the Embargo brought the law and the administration into contempt. Ironically the Embargo effectively solved the impressment problem: the sharp reduction in American oceanic commerce obliged anglophone sailors to return to British ships, where they could be impressed without diplomatic complications. British ministers were unmoved; they saw no reason to complain, or to make concessions.[49]

Jefferson hoped the Embargo would be a useful adjunct to Napoleon's war against Britain, and that in return a grateful Emperor would give him the prize he really wanted, Spanish Florida. The preposterous claim that West Florida had been part of the Louisiana Purchase dominated Franco-American relations during Jefferson's Presidency. Napoleon considered that American economic measures were more damaging to France than Britain, and he set a far higher price on Florida. He believed that in a total war neutrality was impossible; he wanted an American declaration of war. The Emperor would not give Jefferson a province while American ships were transporting flour to feed British troops in Spain. When French frigates got to sea they systematically burnt American grain ships. The resulting outrage in Washington met blank incomprehension in Paris. Ironically the only defence for American shipping was provided by the Royal Navy, which captured many French raiders. Napoleon bullied and deceived Jefferson and his successor James Madison because America was impotent. Without fleets and armies, their arguments about international law and morality lacked weight. He treated the Americans with contempt because they would not help him defeat Britain; indeed American ships systematically,

repeatedly and skilfully violated his 'Continental System', the economic total war he relied on to defeat the British. Napoleon had a hard job telling Americans apart from Englishmen, and he believed that they meekly accepted the British Orders in Council because they were only interested in profit and had no honour. He impounded American merchant ships, and locked up 'American' sailors as prisoners of war – to stop them being impressed into the Royal Navy.[50] Occasional hints that he might relax his regime were self-serving and tactical.

Jefferson's futile Embargo had long antecedents: in 1785 he had argued that America should follow the commercial policy of China 'to practice neither commerce nor navigation'. He knew the idea was impossible,[51] but never changed his view that American merchants were corrupt or corruptible. He dreamt of an agricultural America, relying on others for shipping and industry. Unable to bar his countrymen from the oceans, Jefferson compromised on complete freedom to trade as the least dangerous alternative. He consistently promoted inland expansion, judging that the land would soon outweigh the sea in the nation's political balance.[52] Nor was Jefferson a lone voice: at the height of the 1800 election Virginian ally James Madison publicly linked every British cargo that entered America with the expansion of British influence, connecting Republican politics with an agrarian barter economy.[53] Madison claimed that the fifty or sixty thousand British subjects living in the United States were corrupting the people, preparing the way for re-colonisation through the seaports, the 'reservoirs' that channelled British influence into the country.

The vehemence of Madison's rhetoric, and his reliance on the political wisdom of individual states to save the nation, echoed Jefferson's emphasis on states' rights to secure the nation against the monarchical principles and foreign influence he saw at the heart of Federalism.[54] After 1800, ideology and partisan politics divided the United States along clearly understood, easily drawn lines, separating the commercial seafaring North-East from the slave-owning centre and the growing South and West. The

Louisiana Purchase of 1802 upset the delicate internal balance of power, providing the Republicans with new allies and enabling them to assert that they were the 'national' party, casting their political opponents as servile lackeys of the British. That the Federalists had openly charged the Republicans with Francophilia in the mid-1790s suggests Jefferson's policy platform contained an element of revenge.

For all his hatred of ships and commerce, Jefferson made frequent use of nautical imagery, describing the United States as an 'Argosy' weathering a storm. The link between the sea, storms and periods of acute political stress was clear.[55] For Jefferson the sea was the domain of storm and terror, and not a tranquil, productive element; perhaps he had experienced an Atlantic gale on his European travels. Whatever the cause, it is clear that those who lived by the sea were foreigners to Jefferson, who worked for a hemispheric continental American future, one in which boisterous oceans helped to isolate America from European wars and political contagions. His ultimate object was the spread of republican government across the entire continent by removing foreign rule and influence, while creating a community of agricultural states acting in loose federation. In his view the Louisiana Purchase was only the beginning; Florida and Canada were next. At the same time Connecticut became a foreign country, because it was the last bastion of anglophile Federalism.