

JUNE 1812: MOMENT OF DECISION

On June 1, 1812, Madison presented a list of grievances against Great Britain to Congress. Very aware of the delicate separation of powers he played such a crucial role in constructing, President Madison placed the decision in the hands of the Congress. Madison and his cabinet believed that war with Great Britain was necessary, yet Madison was aware of how divided the country was on the subject. He also knew that the future of the Democratic-Republican party depended on its ability to make a broad national appeal.

The debate in Congress would be of critical importance to the nation's future. Congress faced

fundamental issues involving war and peace, as well as the U.S. relationship with Europe in general and Great Britain in particular. While a range of opinions existed, four principal options had emerged by June 1812.

In the coming days, you will have the opportunity to consider the range of alternatives debated in Congress. Each of the four options that you will explore is based on a particular set of beliefs and values. Identifying these values will help you better understand American history and the forces that shaped the United States.

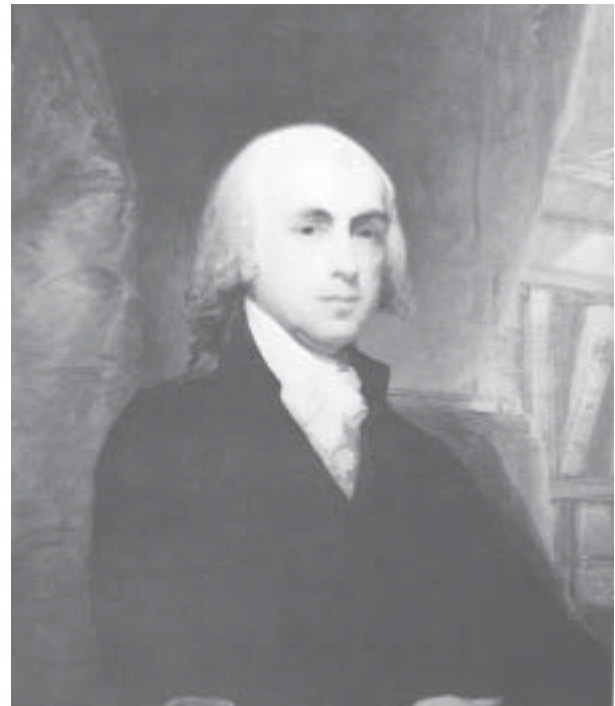
WAR MESSAGE TO CONGRESS, JUNE 1, 1812 JAMES MADISON, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

"Our moderation and conciliation have had no other effect than to encourage perseverance and to enlarge pretensions. We behold our seafaring citizens still the daily victims of lawless violence, committed on the great common and highway of nations, even within sight of the country which owes them protection. We behold our vessels, freighted with the products of our soil and industry, or returning with the honest proceeds of them, wrested from their lawful destinations, confiscated by prize courts no longer the organs of public law but the instruments of arbitrary edicts, and their unfortunate crews dispersed and lost, or forced or inveigled in British ports into British fleets... We behold, in fine, on the side of Great Britain a state of war against the United States, and on the side of the United States a state of peace toward Great Britain....

"Whether the United States shall continue passive under these progressive usurpation's and accumulated wrongs, or, opposing force to force in the defense of their national rights...is a solemn ques-

tion which the Constitution wisely confides to the legislative department of the Government."

Gilbert Stuart



President James Madison

OPTIONS IN BRIEF

OPTION 1 – DEFEND RIGHTS AND HONOR THROUGH UNLIMITED WAR

In 1776, the American colonies resorted to force when accommodation with Great Britain no longer seemed possible. This point has been reached again. After nearly two decades of continuous interference with American trade on the high seas, it is time that America stops fooling itself. We must use the only language Great Britain understands: force. Already our sailors and our families on the western frontier have been subjected to British force either through its navy or its Indian agents. If we wish to preserve national honor and avoid falling back into a state of colonial subjugation, we must act now. The time for talk is over. The time for action is upon us. Let us declare war and establish independence yet again from the contemptuous and haughty British.

OPTION 2 – DEFEND RIGHTS AND HONOR THROUGH LIMITED MARITIME WAR

British provocations necessitate action. Their attacks on American shipping on the high seas and continued impressment of American sailors require a response. Negotiations have failed and non-importation has not caused Britain to stop interfering with the rights of neutrals. This response should, however, be limited to the oceans. Why risk the devastation of American soil with a land war when the battle revolves around freedom of the seas? A limited war aimed at undermining Britain's ability to trade freely will accomplish our goals without risking our cities and farms. As we learned during the period of the quasi-war with France, much can be gained at sea with little cost at home. Furthermore, a limited naval war does not involve creating a large army which could be a threat to our constitutional republic. Respond, yes! But it should be a limited response aimed at the source of these injustices.

OPTION 3 – DELAY ARMED CONFLICT UNTIL PREPARED

British injustices are severe. Our sailors are impressed at an alarming rate. Our neutral trade is suffering. Our western frontier is under attack by the Indians acting as agents of the British. Now, however, is not the time for action. Neither our navy nor our army is prepared to resist one of the world's greatest powers. After years of neglect under the Jefferson and Madison administrations, how can our armed forces resist the victors at Trafalgar and the battle-tested soldiers of the Duke of Wellington? At this time, discretion is the better part of valor. Without appropriate preparations, all we have gained over the past twenty-nine years could be lost. Economic sanctions allow us to respond to British interference while we prepare for the war that is coming.

OPTION 4 – RIGHTS AND HONOR ARE NOT WORTH BLOODSHED

Why war? What do we stand to gain from the resort to force? Granted, Great Britain has interfered with American trade and subjected American sailors to impressment. But should an entire nation be put at risk to protect the profits and livelihoods of a few? War with one of the world's great powers risks devastation and destruction on an unprecedented scale. Have we already forgotten the misery that accompanied the American Revolution? Today Britain is only stronger and better prepared after nearly twenty years of warfare with France. In addition, like it or not, a declaration of war against Britain makes us the allies of one of the world's most bloodthirsty and autocratic rulers – Napoleon. Is this what we fought for in 1776? The right to support tyranny against liberty? Finally, what about the threat to the republican system at home? War with Britain will mean creating an army that will require new taxes. Is it worth risking our republic and our property in the name of rights and honor?

DELAY AN ARMED CONFLICT UNTIL PREPARED

British injustices are severe. We must prepare for war. But we are not yet ready to strike against such a powerful nation's army and navy. We need time to prepare.

Unquestionably Great Britain has gone too far. It must revise its current practices. Its consistent interference with American shipping, impressment of American sailors, and incitement of the Native Americans on American borders is cause for great concern. America must respond if its rights and honor are to be preserved.

However, now is not the time for us to respond with armed aggression. Neither our navy nor our army is prepared to resist one of the world's greatest powers. After years of neglect under the Jefferson and Madison administrations, how can our armed forces resist the victors of Trafalgar and the battle-tested soldiers of the Duke of Wellington? At this time, discretion is the better part of valor. America must proceed prudently or risk losing all it has worked so hard to gain over the past several decades.

If the United States delays a declaration of war until the fall, we can gain almost six months and perhaps even more time to prepare for war against the British. And prepare we must! Currently, our armed forces, weakened through years of inactivity and budget cuts, are in no condition for a war. Our navy lacks the necessary vessels to battle Britain's larger ships and our army is small and unprepared. What warrior begins a conflict without the ability to inflict pain and harm on the enemy? Great Britain has only become stronger as a result of the continuous warfare with France. To expose this nation to devastating attacks by the British without the power to retaliate in kind or even the ability to defend ourselves seems to place honor and rights before common sense.

How shall we buy the time we need? On April 1, 1812, Congress instated a ninety-day embargo against Great Britain. This embargo hits Great Britain where it hurts with none of the negative risks associated with waging a war for which we are unprepared. We can extend this embargo until November and let it have its effect before launching an armed crusade against Great Britain. By November the bad weather in the Atlantic will work to our advantage, serving as a shield against British naval incursions. This will give us additional time for preparation. We can use this time to strengthen and further prepare our forces and seaports. Stalling in this way is not a sign of weakness or indecision. Rather, it demonstrates an intelligent use of all our advantages as we prepare for battle against a powerful enemy.

Although justified in our anger, now is not the time to engage the British in a military conflict. By delaying a declaration of war, we can allow economic warfare to have its effect, put off a conflict until the natural blockade of poor weather can provide us with a military advantage, and gain valuable time to prepare for a military conflict.

FROM THE HISTORICAL RECORD

Thomas Sammons, Congressman from New York:

"[We] would not wish to engage in a war unless we were attacked on our own territories or brought on by our enemies, before we are prepared with an army and would for the present remove all restrictive measures for emports and exports."

Philadelphia resident Manuel Eyre to Congressman Roberts:

"Would it not be best to procrastinate the time of making war until we are better prepared to strike the first blow with effect—late in the fall and winter British ships of war cannot encounter the tempestuous weather on our coasts without almost inevitable destruction—by that time the enlistments of our new army will have greatly progressed & and our sea ports better fortified?"

Obadiah German, Senator from New York:

"...if we were even in a state of preparation, and possessed the means of insuring a favorable issue, it would be bad policy for this country, at the present time, to enter into war with Great Britain, although perhaps many weighty reasons might be adduced in support of such argument. I will first call the attention of the Senate to the ability and strength of the nation we are about, by this bill, to declare war against. Gentlemen ought to recollect, that Great Britain has almost constantly engaged in war for twenty years past against one of the most powerful nations that ever existed; and for a considerable part of that time, the energies of her enemy have been directed by war's favorite genius—NAPOLEON, who has succeeded in uniting nearly the whole force of the Continent of Europe against her; against that very nation which we are about to assail; and what has been the effect? Is Great Britain less powerful now, than she was twenty years ago? No, sir, this constant warfare has increased her powers instead of diminishing them. Great Britain is a wily, active nation. She has been trained to war. She will not measure her steps and movements by ours; if we are not prepared to defend our seaports, she will not wait until we are; and should she get possession of New Orleans, it will cost much blood and treasure to dislodge her. I do not, Mr. President, draw all these discouraging pictures, or relate these lamentable facts, because I would shrink from the conflict or terrors of war, for the defence of the rights of my injured country, sooner than any gentleman of this Senate, nor with a wish that all these evils may be realized; my object is to avert them from my country. I do it, sir, to check the precipitate step of plunging my country prematurely into a war, without any of the means of making the war terrible to our enemy; and with the certainty that it will be terrible to ourselves, or at least to our merchants, our seaports, and cities. Yes, sir; the millions that your merchants will lose in consequence of this rash, this premature step, will strike them with terror and dismay from New Orleans to Maine. A country well prepared to meet war will scarcely find war necessary, but if it cannot be avoided, preparation does away half its terrors. And if gentlemen will show me an army of twenty-five thousand men, well formed, disciplined, and supplied, at the place of the grand rendezvous near Albany, give us a reasonable increase of our navy, and will place both the great belligerents on equal footing, (as I consider them equal trespassers on our rights,) then, I say, if Great Britain will not do us justice, I will vote at the proper time a declaration of war against her; and I will use my utmost exertions to make the war terrible to her, but to declare war without the means of making the enemy feel its horrors, and at a time when it must produce evil and terrors only to ourselves, strikes me with astonishment."

James A. Bayard, Senator from Delaware:

"It is not enough that we have cause for war; we must see that we are prepared, and in a condition to make war. You do not go to war for the benefit of your enemy, but your own advantage; not to give proofs of a vain and heedless courage, but to assert your rights and redress your wrongs. If you commence hostilities before you are prepared to strike a blow, and while your cities, your territory, and your property on the ocean, are exposed to the mercy of a Government possessing vast resources of war, what can you expect but to add new distresses, defeat, and disgrace to the wrongs of which you complain? It is a strange motive for war—a wish to gratify the rapacity, to swell the triumphs, and to increase the insolence of the enemy. No time has existed for years past when we had less cause to complain of the conduct of Great

Britain. Her vessels of war had all been withdrawn from our coast, as he presumed, in order to avoid collisions and hostility. If the war be suspended till November, the government and the people will both be better prepared to sustain it. Postpone the war, and we will submit to the embargo till November. This will furnish time for the return of your ships and seamen. Are you provided with means to annoy the enemy, or to defend yourselves? Have you an army or navy which can make any impression? Are your exposed towns fortified and garrisoned? Was any nation ever less prepared for war? It would require the whole military force that you now possess to constitute an adequate defence for New Orleans, New York, and Newport. During the winter months you will be defended by the elements. Postpone the war till November, and we shall not have to dread an enemy on our coast till April. In the mean time, go on with your recruiting, fill up, discipline, and train an army. Take the stations, if you please, which will enable you to open an early campaign. Your trade will all have time to return before hostilities commence, and having all your ships and seamen at home, you may be prepared to put forth all your strength upon the ocean on the opening of the ensuing Spring. Shall we, by an untimely precipitancy, yielding to a fretful impatience of delay, throw our wealth into the hands of the enemy, and feed that very rapacity which it is our object to subdue or to punish? We can lose nothing by delay; much will be certainly saved; and at a moment pregnant with great events, it was most evidently our true policy to temporize. You give up no right, yield no pretension, and profit by every day in rendering the condition of the country more secure, and its attitude more formidable. The just appreciation of time is among the highest points of political sagacity."

BELIEFS AND ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING OPTION 3

1. The United States may not be prepared for war now, but we must get prepared or risk losing our rights as a free and independent nation.
2. Engaging in unlimited war with Great Britain at this time threatens the safety of our coastal towns and cities. There is no cowardice in waiting until we are prepared.

SUPPORTING ARGUMENTS FOR OPTION 3

1. The U.S. army and navy are much smaller and weaker than Great Britain's. The United States has few experienced troops and naval commanders, while Britain has been at war with France for a generation. Engaging in unlimited war with Great Britain at this time threatens the safety of our coastal towns and cities and puts our merchant ships in increased danger. Delay will allow time to fortify coastal towns and cities and time for U.S. merchant ships to find the safety of their ports.
2. We have successfully contained Indian aggression on the frontier at the Battle of Tippecanoe. Most of our troops are currently engaged on the frontier and we would be foolish to relocate them now to protect our coastline. If we are going to take on battle with the British, we will need time to prepare more troops.
3. By relying on the embargo as our first defense and delaying a declaration of war until November, we will be able buy time, prepare for war, and benefit from the seasonal advantage provided by the bad weather that begins in the Atlantic at that time. This weather will prevent Britain from bringing its forces to our shores until next spring. And this, in turn, will give us additional time to prepare our forces.

Presenting Your Option

The Setting: Your group is made up of members of Congress with strong opinions about President Madison's request to consider war with Great Britain. You and members of opposing groups have decided to spend a summer evening dining at a fancy Washington hotel to listen to each other's viewpoints. You have also decided to invite a group of concerned citizens to the dinner and to solicit their views on this matter.

Your Assignment: Your group's assignment is to persuade the concerned citizens that the United States should adopt your option. After reading your option and the supporting materials, answer the questions below from the viewpoint of your option. This worksheet will help you prepare a three-to-five minute presentation that your group will deliver on Day Three. Keep in mind that your group's presentation may include only information that was available in June of 1812. After all of the groups have presented their options, the concerned citizens will have an opportunity to challenge your arguments.

Organizing Your Group: Each member of your group will take a specific role. Below is a brief explanation of the responsibility of each role. Before preparing your sections of the presentation, work together to address the questions below. The **group director** is responsible for organizing the presentation of your group's option to the president. The **political expert** is responsible for explaining why your option is most likely to succeed in the current domestic and international climates. The **military expert** is responsible for explaining how the group's option represents the best case militarily. The **historian** is responsible for explaining how the lessons of history justify your option.

Consider the following questions from your option's perspective as you prepare your presentation:

1. What is the main cause of the present crisis and who is to blame?
2. How should the United States respond to the present crisis?
3. What are the issues that are most important to ensuring the future welfare of the United States?
4. What will happen if your recommendations are not heeded?
5. In summary, what course of action does your option recommend that the United States pursue?

Role Playing the Four Options: Debate and Discussion

Objectives:

Students will:

- Analyze the issues that frame the debate on U.S. policy in 1812.
- Identify the core underlying values of the options.
- Integrate the arguments and beliefs of the options and the background reading into a persuasive, coherent presentation.
- Work cooperatively within groups to organize effective presentations.

Handouts:

"Evaluation Form" (TRB-23) for Concerned Citizens

In the Classroom:

1. *Setting the Stage* – Review the situation in June 1812 with the students. Organize the room so that the four option groups face a row of desks reserved for a group of "concerned citizens."

2. *Managing the Simulation* – Explain that the simulation will begin with three-to-five minute presentations by members of the option groups. Encourage presenters to speak clearly and convincingly.

3. *Guiding Discussion* – Following the presentations, invite members from the group of "concerned citizens" to ask cross-examination questions. Make sure that each "concerned citizen" has an opportunity to ask at least one question. The questions should be evenly distributed among all four option groups. If time permits, encourage members of the option groups to challenge the positions of the other groups. During cross-examination, allow any option group member to respond. (As an alternative approach, permit questions after each option is presented.)

Homework:

Students should read "Epilogue: The War and its Consequences" in the student text (pages 28-30).