

1812: Conservatives, War Hawks, and the Nation's Honor

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The modern tendency to seek materialistic motives and economic factors in all human relations has greatly obscured one of the basic causes of the War of 1812. A generation of historians, brought up on the disillusionment that followed the failure of the attempt to "make the world safe for democracy" in 1919, has persistently searched for the hidden economic factors behind all wars. Yet a cursory glance at the statistics of American commerce in the first decade of the nineteenth century will show that the War of 1812 was the most uneconomic war the United States has ever fought. A casual search through the letters and speeches of contemporaries reveals that those who fought the war were primarily concerned with the honor and integrity of the nation.

Students of the period are familiar with the standard explanation for the war: the election of 1810, by providing 63 new faces in a House of 142, represented a popular disillusionment with the Jeffersonian system and supplied the new Twelfth Congress with a number of young war hawks, such as Henry Clay, John C. Calhoun, and Felix Grundy, who were determined to assert America's position in the world. Since the loudest demand for strong measures, as well as some of the ablest of the war hawks, came from the West, historians have been channeled into a search for reasons why the West should have demanded a war for "free trade and sailors' rights"; the historiography of the period has been almost exclusively concerned with "Western war aims." The desire for land, Canadian or Indian, fear of a British-backed Indian conspiracy, concern over the declining prices of agricultural products and the restriction of markets abroad, all at one time or another have been represented as basic causes of the war.

The weakness in this interpretation is that it virtually ignores the vote on the declaration of war in June 1812. The West may have been influenced by economic as well as patriotic motives, but the West, after all, had only ten votes in the House of Representatives. The South Atlantic states from Maryland to Georgia cast thirty-nine, or nearly half, of the seventy-nine votes for war in 1812. Any explanation of the war must place primary emphasis on the Southern Congressmen, and neither feature of the standard interpretation—the concept of a "revolution" in popular sentiment in 1810 and the emphasis on economic factors—satisfactorily explains their votes for war.

Most of these Southern Congressmen were "old Republicans," conservatives whose political Bible was the Republican platform of 1800 and who had sat in Congress for years. In the South there is no evidence of a sudden popular demand in the election of 1810 for a more energetic government and a more vigorous foreign policy. Maryland, which voted six to three for war in June 1812, had four new members in the Twelfth Congress, one a Federalist. The three new Republicans either won the election without opposition or they replaced men who had supported military preparations and a stronger foreign policy in the Eleventh Congress.

Virginia, which held her elections for the Twelfth Congress in the spring of 1811, returned a virtually identical delegation of seventeen Republicans and five Federalists. The two Quids, John Randolph and Edwin Gray, were reelected, as were most of the conservative Republicans of the Eleventh Congress. The Shenandoah Valley remained as solidly Federalist as it had been in 1800, and the tramontane region, the one part of the state that might have been

concerned with Indians and Western lands, elected Thomas Wilson) its first Federalist since 1793.

Virginia's election as a whole produced five new Republican members; none apparently was elected on the issue of peace or war. John Wayles Eppes, the only strong leader Virginia had sent to the Eleventh Congress, moved to John Randolph's district in the Southside and was defeated by Randolph in the election. The contest was close even though Eppes never formally declared himself a candidate, but the objections to Randolph centered on his vigorous opposition to the Madison administration. No one maintained that the election of Eppes would ensure stronger measures toward Great Britain. Eppes's seat in his former district was taken by James Pleasants, a war Republican who in the postwar period was to revert to the old Jeffersonian strict constructionist doctrines. In Thomas Jefferson's own district, which included Albemarle County, David S. Garland was replaced by Hugh Nelson, a close friend of James Monroe and member of the "minority" that had supported Monroe against James Madison's election in 1808 because it felt that Madison was too nationalistic. Nelson entered the Twelfth Congress with a decided preference for peace at any price. In the Fredericksburg area the administration regular, Walter Jones, declined to run again, and in the election Major John P. Hungerford defeated John Taliaferro by six votes. Hungerford was a former Quid and had sat on the Monroe electoral committee in 1808. Taliaferro contested the election, received the support of the war hawks in the House, and was awarded the seat. In the Fauquier-Culpeper district John Love, who had generally supported preparedness measures in the Eleventh Congress, declined reelection and was replaced by another war Republican, Dr. Aylet Hawes.

Nearly half the Virginia Congressmen were elected without opposition, and even where there was a contest the election seldom turned on the issue of foreign policy. Typical of Virginia conservatives reelected in 1811 was John Clopton, who had represented the Richmond district since 1801. If a letter to his constituents published in the Virginia Argus is a fair summary of his campaign platform, Clopton was running in support of the nonintercourse law and against the Bank of the United States, giving no indication of any departure from the Jeffersonian system. Clopton had two opponents, one of whom withdrew before the election, while the other made public statements agreeing with Clopton on every issue.

The election of 1810 in North Carolina similarly produced no great change in her representation. Of her twelve Congressmen eight were reelected, two of them Federalists and one, Richard Stanford, a Randolph Quid. Two of the four newcomers had served in Congress during the Jefferson administration (William Blackledge from 1803 to 1808 and Thomas Blount from 1804 to 1808). The only new faces in the North Carolina group, Israel Pickens and William R. King, were war hawks, but neither defeated an incumbent.

The political "revolution" in South Carolina in the election of 1810, which produced a unanimous vote for war in June 1812, was more apparent than real. The election of the three great war hawk leaders, John C. Calhoun, William Lowndes, and Langdon Cheves, was more an addition of talent than of numbers to the war party in Congress. In the campaign Calhoun had openly advocated war, but he was elected without opposition since the incumbent-his cousin Joseph Calhoun, a war hawk in the Eleventh Congress declined reelection and supported him. William Lowndes succeeded to the seat of John Taylor, one of the administration's floor leaders in the Eleventh Congress who had been elected to the Senate. Cheves was elected in 1810 to fill a vacant seat in the Eleventh Congress and was reelected to the Twelfth.

The other prominent war hawk, David Rogerson Williams, took the seat of his brother-in-law Robert Witherspoon, who declined reelection and threw his support to Williams. Williams,

moreover, as a member of the Ninth Congress, had followed John Randolph in rebellion against the Jefferson administration in 1806 and thus fits more into the pattern of the converted conservative. Indeed, as late as May 1812 a Federalist member of the House observed that Williams was still trying to make up his mind between peace and war. The only real contest in South Carolina was the defeat of Lemuel J. Alston by Elias Earle, but no current issue was involved for the two men had taken turns defeating each other for years.

The election in South Carolina illustrates the real significance of the election of 1810. Without any fundamental change in public opinion, and partly by coincidence, South Carolina produced some of the outstanding leaders of the Twelfth Congress. But the change, as in the Western elections that produced Henry Clay and Felix Grundy, was primarily in ability rather than in numbers. Indeed, speaking strictly in terms of numbers, the actual war hawks elected in 1810 were outvoted by Federalists and antiwar Republicans in the Twelfth Congress. The young war hawks from the South and West were certainly able men, and largely by force of character alone they led an unwilling and apathetic country to war.

Yet was leadership alone enough? Several prominent war hawks- Clay, Richard M. Johnson, Ezekiel Bacon, Cheves, and Peter B. Porter- were members of the Eleventh Congress, but despite their ability they had been unable to lead that body in any consistent direction. At least as significant as the sudden appearance of a few talented war hawks in the Twelfth Congress was the gradual conversion of the average Republican from Jeffersonian pacifism to a vigorous defense of America's neutral rights. It was these men, most of them Southerners who had been in Congress for years, who provided the necessary votes for war, just as they had provided the main support for the embargo and nonintercourse laws. Their conversion seems to have stemmed primarily from a disillusionment with the old system of commercial retaliation and a growing realization that the only alternative to war was submission and national disgrace. Every expedient to avoid war honorably had been tried without success. Submission to the orders in council presaged a return to colonial status; war seemed the only alternative. The war, at least as far as the South was concerned, was brought on by men who had had a "bellyful" of England, not by men who were interested in Western lands, or Indians, or prices in the lower Mississippi Valley.

The major weakness in the various economic interpretations is their failure to explain the demand for war in the Middle Atlantic states and in the South. The "expansionist" school of historians, with internal variations, generally maintains that the war was the result of the Western desire for land, in Canada as well as in Indian-dominated Indiana, and that the conquest of Canada was demanded both for its own sake and because the British were backing the Tecumseh confederacy. The difficulty is that the areas most concerned with these problems-Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan-were territories with no vote in Congress. Even Ohio, which presumably had a direct interest in the Wabash lands, was by no means unanimously in favor of war. Its one representative, Jeremiah Morrow, voted for war in 1812 just as he had voted for the embargo in 1807, but Ohio's two senators, Thomas Worthington and Alexander Campbell, opposed war in 1812 because the nation was unprepared and they feared an Indian attack on the defenseless frontier. Both preferred to retain the old system of commercial retaliation. Some have suggested that Ohio's senators were out of touch with public sentiment, but a recent biographer of Worthington feels that a plebiscite held in the spring of 1812 would probably have shown a majority of the people of Ohio against war. Kentucky and Tennessee, it is true, showed considerable interest in the Indian lands and in Canada, but even so their votes in Congress were hardly enough to carry the country to war.

Julius W. Pratt, leading proponent of the "expansionist" thesis, circumvented this difficulty by conjecturing a "frontier crescent" of war hawks extending from New Hampshire (John A. Harper) to Kentucky (Clay and Johnson) and Tennessee (Felix Grundy) and ending in South Carolina (Calhoun, Lowndes, and Cheves) and Georgia (George M. Troup). Yet this seems an arbitrary conjunction of dissimilar areas. Why should New Hampshire or Vermont have been interested enough in the Wabash lands to go to war? And how explain a Southern interest in the Wabash or in Canada? Pratt plugged this hole by surmising a bargain between Southern and Western war hawks in which Florida would be brought into the Union to balance the conquest of Canada. The only evidence he cites, however, is one editorial in a Tennessee newspaper.

It is true that Southern war hawks talked much about the conquest of Canada, but they seem to have regarded it as primarily a method of conducting the war rather than as an ultimate objective. Secretary of State Monroe, for instance, felt that Canada might be invaded, "not as an object of the war but as a means to bring it to a satisfactory conclusion." On the other hand there is evidence that some Southerners actually feared the annexation of Canada. John Randolph certainly considered the possibility that Canada might be acquired the best of reasons for not going to war, and a fellow Virginian elected in 1810 wrote home in December 1811: "The New Yorkers and Vermonters are very well inclined to have upper Canada united with them, by way of increasing their influence in the Union." As to the other half of the bargain there is little evidence that outside of the border area the South was much interested in Florida, and recent scholars have tended to minimize the importance of Florida in the Southern demand for war.

Somewhat more plausible is the economic interpretation of the war in terms of declining farm prices and the restriction of markets abroad. This point of view was first put forth in the early 1930's by George Rogers Taylor, who suggested that the declining price of agricultural products, particularly in the lower Mississippi Valley, may have been a factor in the Western demand for war. The gist of this argument is summed up in a letter of a Louisiana planter of July 25, 1811: "Upon the subject of cotton we are not such fools, but we know that. . . the British are giving us what they please for it . . . But we happen to know that we should get a much greater price for it, for we have some idea of the extent of the Continent, and the demand there for it; . . . and, therefore, upon the score of lucre, as well as national honor, we are ready." More recently, this argument has been adopted to explain the West-South alliance. Both sections were concerned with the declining prices of the great staple exports, cotton, tobacco, and hemp, and were inclined to blame the British orders in council for restricting their markets. The South and West, in this view; went to war primarily to defend the right to export their products without interference from Britain.

That prices for these great staples declined gradually throughout the first decade of the century cannot be denied, but to what extent the British blockades were responsible is more difficult to determine. The direct trade in agricultural products was not generally affected by the orders in council; not till the winter of 1811-12 did the British interfere with cotton shipments, though their action at that time helped to justify war-at least in the mind of the North Carolina planter Nathaniel Macon. It is interesting, however, that despite the British orders the market for cotton was rapidly increasing both in quantity exported and in geographical area. The declining price was a long term phenomenon only temporarily interrupted by the postwar prosperity, rather than a result of British restrictions. Statistics on the export of tobacco similarly give no real indication that the British orders in council were responsible for the constriction in markets or the drop in prices.

It is true, however, that the opinion that British restrictions were responsible for lower prices, even if unjustified, seems to have been widely held in the South. Margaret Kinard Latimer has recently brought to light evidence that this was a major factor in the demand for war at least in South Carolina. "Whether or not fighting a war with England," she concludes, "was the logical step to take as a remedy to the commercial and thus agricultural distress is not the question-the South Carolinians of 1812 were convinced that a war would help." Yet this leaves unanswered the question of why South Carolinians preferred to ignore the probability that war would further disrupt their commerce, while others, notably the New Englanders, were so painfully aware of it. Is it possible that those South Carolina politicians who stressed the cotton depression as a cause for war were merely supplying additional reasons that might influence the wavering?

It must also be remembered that the decline in prices was not universal. Prices for beef, corn, and flour, the main exports of the Middle Atlantic states, actually increased over the decade, while the price of pork declined only slightly. In 1810-11 total exports in these products nearly doubled as American farms fed the Duke of Wellington's army in Spain. Pennsylvania, which voted sixteen to two for war with England, can hardly have been following the dictates of economic interest.

The South and the Middle Atlantic states, whose Congressmen furnished the major support for war, had little to gain economically from the conflict. Their direct trade in agricultural products was scarcely affected by the orders in council, and England had long been the major foreign market for both sections. Indeed, it might even be argued that these sections stood to lose as much by war as did New England. When, therefore, Nathaniel Macon spoke of going to war "to obtain the privilege of carrying the produce of our lands to a market"-an oft-quoted passage -he undoubtedly had in mind the "privilege" as much as the trade. Southerners went to war primarily to defend their rights, not their purses.

This is not to deny that economic factors were present. The final synthesis of the causes of the war will have to take into account various material factors-the fear of an Indian conspiracy in the West, for instance, and the concern over declining prices in the South-but it will also have to recognize that none of these economic theses furnishes a satisfactory explanation for the general demand for war. The only unifying factor, present in all sections of the country, was the growing feeling of patriotism, the realization that something must be done to vindicate the national honor. In recent years historians have tended more and more to stress this factor, particularly in its influence on the West, where a feeling of national pride was an obvious concomitant of the youth and exuberance of that section. Even Julius W. Pratt admitted that the war fever in the West "was doubtless due to various causes-perhaps most of all to sheer exasperation at the long continued dilatory fashion of handling the nation's foreign affairs?" This factor was probably even more important in the Middle Atlantic states and in the South where fewer material interests were at stake.

The system of commercial retaliation itself had not been defended on economic grounds. The first nonintercourse resolution had been introduced in the Spring of 1806 by a Pennsylvanian, Andrew Gregg, as an instrument for gaining by peaceful means some recognition of America's neutral rights. The embargo and the later nonintercourse laws were intended to furnish the President with a lever of negotiation, to maintain the national dignity short of war. It was the growing disillusionment with this system, the growing feeling that war was the only means for maintaining the nation's integrity that eventually brought on the conflict. This mental conversion is aptly illustrated by the following letter of John Clopton of Virginia:

"Let us consider what our government has done- how long it has home with the repeated injuries which have been touched on in this letter-how often negotiations have been resorted to for the purpose of avoiding war; and the aggressions, instead of having been in any measure relaxed have been pursued with aggravating violence without a single ray of expectation that there exists any sort of disposition in the British Cabinet to relax, but the strongest disposition to persist in their career.

. . . . The outrages in impressing American seamen exceed all manner of description. Indeed the whole system of aggression now is such that the real question between G. Britain and the U. States has ceased to be a question merely relating to certain rights of commerce about which speculative politicians might differ in opinion-it is now clearly, positively, and directly a question of independence, that is to say, whether the U. States are really an independent nation."

Not all Republicans came to a similar conclusion at the time. The process was a gradual one, beginning with the *Chesapeake* affair and the failure of the embargo to secure a recognition of American rights. The prominent Virginia Republican, Wilson Cary Nicholas, was one of the first to conclude that war was inevitable. Shortly after the Randolph schism in 1806, Nicholas had entered Congress at the behest of Jefferson, who needed an able floor leader in the House. The failure of the embargo convinced him that the whole policy of commercial retaliation was unsound, for it could not be enforced effectively enough to coerce the belligerents and it resulted only in the ruin of American agriculture. Since the Madison administration was unwilling to abandon the policy, Nicholas, rather than go into opposition' resigned his seat in the autumn of 1809. "We have tried negotiation until it is disgraceful to think of renewing it," he wrote Jefferson. "Commercial restrictions have been so managed as to operate only to our own injury. War then or submission only remain. In deciding between them I cannot hesitate a moment." George Washington Campbell of Tennessee reached a similar conclusion shortly after the *Chesapeake* affair, and he became one of the leading advocates for military preparations in the Tenth and Eleventh Congresses.

The gradual realization of the need for a more militant foreign policy was also reflected in the prominent Republican newspapers. Thomas Ritchie of the Richmond Enquirer £ considered the embargo the only honorable alternative to war, and when it was repealed Ritchie and the Enquirer began openly advocating war with England. William Duane, editor of the Philadelphia Aurora, generally supported the system of commercial retaliation, but the repudiation of David Erskine's agreement and the mission of Francis "Copenhagen" Jackson in the fall of 1809 convinced him that Britain did not intend to negotiate the question of neutral rights. By December 1809 he was advocating military preparations, the arming of American merchant ships, and, if those measures failed to intimidate Britain, "defensive war."

The old Jeffersonian, Nathaniel Macon, struggled long and valiantly with his conscience in an effort to reconcile Republican dogma with the obvious need for a vigorous defense of American rights. Throughout the Eleventh Congress he had been one of the administration leaders in the House, yet his basic conservatism was frequently evident. In the spring of 1810 he cooperated with John Randolph's efforts to reduce the size of the army and navy, even advocating that they be abolished altogether. As chairman of the foreign relations committee, Macon reported the nonintercourse bill of April 1810, known as Macon's Bill Number Two, but he personally opposed it because he felt it too provocative. Not until the beginning of the Twelfth Congress did he reach the conclusion that war was the only alternative. War was justified, he told the House in

December 1811, because of the recent British seizures of ships carrying American agricultural products. This new aggression, he felt, showed that the British, instead of becoming more lenient, were actually tightening their system, and that further negotiation was useless. Macon thereafter cooperated with the war hawks but with some reluctance and with an occasional lapse. He voted against every effort to increase the size of the navy, and he consistently opposed all efforts during the session to raise the taxes to finance the war.

A number of Republicans, though they cooperated with the preparedness measures of the war hawks, could not make up their minds on the basic issue of peace or war until the last minute. As late as May 1812 a Massachusetts Federalist reported, perhaps somewhat wishfully, that a majority of the Virginia delegation was still against war. Besides the Federalists and the Quids, Randolph and Gray, he listed Taliaferro, Nelson, William A. Burwell, John Smith, and Matthew Clay as opposed to war. Representative of this group was Hugh Nelson. Nelson had been elected in 1811, but entered the Twelfth Congress with a lingering sympathy for the old Republican "minority" whose leader was John Randolph of Roanoke and whose prophet was John Taylor of Caroline. "I am a messmate of John Randolph," he wrote to a friend in Charlottesville shortly after his arrival in Washington. "The more I see him the more I like him. He is as honest as the sun, with all his foibles) and as much traduced I believe as any man has ever been. . . . Do not be surprised if before the session closes I am classified with him as a minority man." Nelson's maiden speech in the House came on the resolution to increase the size of the regular army. It was a rehash of all the old Republican antiwar arguments-war would centralize the government, strengthen the executive, burden the people with taxes, armies, and navies, undermine our "republican simplicity," and subvert the Constitution. "I care not for the prices of cotton and tobacco as compared with the Constitution," he averred. Moreover he felt it unlikely that the United States could ever gain recognition of her neutral rights, particularly since the only program the war hawks suggested was a territorial war begun by an invasion of Canada. Canada could not be conquered, but even if it could, would this enforce our rights? "Certainly not. The way to enforce these rights was by way of a great maritime force, which the nation were incompetent to raise and support." Nelson nevertheless felt the country should prepare for any eventuality because unless Britain relented there was no alternative to war. "I shall vote for the increase of the regular force," he concluded, to go hand in hand with my friends, even in a war, if necessary and just. The most important of these friends was Nelson's neighbor from Charlottesville, Secretary of State Monroe, who by the spring of 1812 was a vigorous advocate of strong measures. In June, John Randolph wrote to John Taylor of Caroline that Monroe was "most furiously warlike & carries the real strength of the Southern representation with him."

Even more important than the personal influence of Monroe was the stimulus provided by President Madison. Most of the conservatives considered themselves loyal Republicans and were accustomed to following Presidential leadership in dealing with Britain and France. The policy of commercial retaliation had been largely an administration measure, and when the Twelfth Congress assembled in November 1811 Congress naturally looked to the Executive for guidance. Madison not only encouraged the war fever but he cooperated with the war hawks to a degree that has only recently begun to be fully recognized. His Annual Message to Congress in November 1811 outlined a program of military and naval preparations that was adopted virtually intact by the war hawks.⁴¹ His release of the correspondence of Captain John Henry in March 1812 and his request in April for a thirty-day embargo as a prelude to war have been interpreted by his most recent biographer, Irving Brant, as attempts to stimulate the war sentiment in Congress.

The war hawks took full advantage of these moves by the President in their efforts to hold the conservatives in line. In the later stages of the session, when a number of Republicans began to get cold feet, the war hawks informed them that it was too late to back out. When in April the bill initiating a temporary embargo was reported for debate, Henry Clay warned the House that if it stopped now after all the war measures it had passed, it would cover itself "with shame and indelible disgrace." That this argument was effective is indicated by John Smilie, who followed Clay on the floor. Smilie, whose western-Pennsylvania Republicanism dated back to the fight over the Constitution in 1787, admitted that from the beginning of the session he had only reluctantly voted for the various proposals of the war hawks. He actually preferred continuing commercial retaliation to a war and an army of 25,000. But he realized it was too late to back down now; the nation's honor was at stake: "If we now recede we shall be a reproach to all nations."

Added to this internal stimulus was the pressure of continuing British intransigence. On May 22, dispatches arrived in Washington from British Foreign Secretary Lord Castlereagh that contained nothing but a restatement of the British position. President Madison himself concluded that this was the last formal notice intended by the British government and sent his war message to Congress on June 1. It is not difficult to conceive that many a reluctant Republican came to the same decision.

It was thus with mixed motives that a majority of Republicans followed the war hawks to war. It is nevertheless clear that a primary factor in the mind of each was the conclusion that the only alternative to war was submission to the British commercial system! The balance of power in the House was held by men who had been in Congress for years, who had tried every expedient short of war to secure a recognition of American rights, and who at last had become surfeited with British commercial regulations. The war hawks, it is true, provided with their skill and energy the necessary impetus to war, but they could not have done so had not a majority of the Republican Party, particularly in the South, become gradually converted to the idea that war was the only alternative to national humiliation and disgrace. In this sense the war hawks acted as the intangible catalyst for a reaction whose basic elements were already present.

War Vote in House of Representatives 1812		
State	For War	Against War
New Hampshire	3	2
Massachusetts	6	8
Vermont	3	1
Rhode Island	0	2
Connecticut	0	7
New York	3	11
New Jersey	2	4
Delaware	0	1
Pennsylvania	16	2
Maryland	6	3
Virginia	14	5
North Carolina	6	3
South Carolina	8	0
Georgia	3	0
Ohio	1	0
Kentucky	5	0
Tennessee	3	0