

# John Jay and the War of 1812

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President Harry Truman once referred to the War of 1812 as  
*“the silliest damn war we ever had.”*

In some ways he was right; the war was full of blunders. But President Madison had a difficult task before him at the onset of the war.

The country was only 36 years old and consisted of 18 states. American military forces were feeble due to the Republican governments aversion to peacetime armies. New England, which had the best trained military troops remained neutral during the war. The navy was virtually nonexistent, and the country had little money since it did not re-charter the Bank of the United States in 1811. Geography, lack of technology and fractured political parties all led to a great number of problems during the war.





Many of the issues that caused the War of 1812 had been in existence since the United States was established.

In 1783, John Jay, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin signed the *Treaty of Paris* for the Americans. This document established the United States as its own country and defined its borders. It also was an official agreement with Britain to deal with outstanding issues that were a result of the Revolutionary War. Three important issues resolved by the treaty were:

- 1: Britain would have to surrender all the territory in the United States and evacuate all forts it still occupied.
- 2: All creditors on both sides would need to be repaid for debts incurred prior to and during the war.
- 3: Land that was confiscated from Loyalists had to be returned to its rightful owners.

In 1793, the outbreak of war between France and Great Britain ended the long peace that had enabled the United States to flourish in terms of trade and finance. The United States decided to maintain a position of neutrality in the war between the two countries.

Without warning, the British government used the Royal Navy to capture nearly 250 neutral American merchant ships carrying goods from French colonies in the West Indies. Americans were outraged; and Democratic Republicans led by Thomas Jefferson, demanded a declaration of war against Britain.



President Washington sent an envoy to London to negotiate a treaty with England in hopes of avoiding a war. The treaty, which was negotiated by John Jay, reaffirmed many of the outstanding unresolved issues from the *Treaty of Paris*. It required Britain to stop capturing sailors, but granted them “most favorable nation” status as trading partners.

This bitterly angered France and the Democratic-Republicans, further cementing a national divide and leading to the creation of a two-party system in American politics.

The *Jay Treaty* was valid for ten years. Efforts failed to agree on a replacement treaty in 1806 when President Jefferson rejected the *Monroe–Pinkney Treaty*. Tensions continued to escalate between the two nations.





The Napoleonic Wars had Britain and France engage in conflict beginning in 1803. The United States attempted to stay neutral, but the impressment of American seamen by the British made it difficult. In 1806, Napoleon issued *The Berlin Decree*, which forbade trade with Britain. The British government responded the next year with *Orders in Council*, which instituted a blockade of French-controlled Europe, and authorized the British navy to seize ships violating the blockade.

In response to this, President Thomas Jefferson introduced the Embargo Act in 1807. The goal was to help the United States by demonstrating to Britain and France their dependence on American goods, convincing them to respect American neutrality and stop impressing American seamen.



*“The Embargo presses very heavily on the class of people who were accustomed to maintain themselves by daily labour along the wharves...I was informed today that the persons maintained in the Almshouse, & those who receive daily rations from it, amounted altogether to more than five thousand.”*

Peter Augustus Jay to John Jay, February 19, 1808

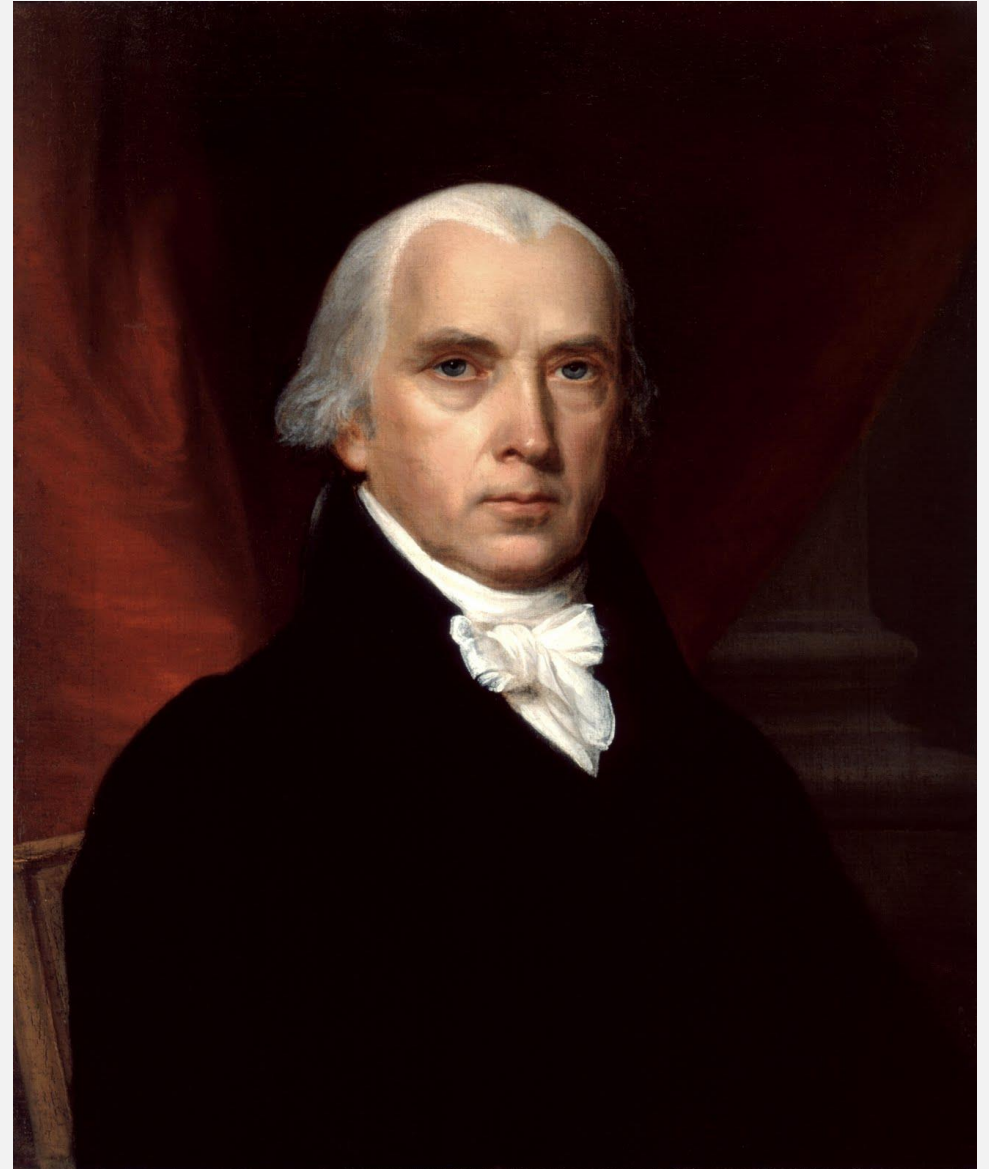
Subsequent acts attempted to relieve the pressure on the American economy by allowing trade with any nation but France or Britain, all while maintaining a neutral position on the war between the two. However, France and Britain were the United States largest trading partners and the economy could not recover without those commercial relationships.



John Jay had been a leading member of the Federalist party at the turn of the 19th century. Federalists believed in the need of a strong central government and favored a relationship with Great Britain. George Washington, Alexander Hamilton and John Adams were all leaders in the Federalist party. After the deaths of both Washington and Hamilton and the defeat of John Adams in 1800, Federalism began to wane in popularity.

By 1812, New England was the last region that still had strong Federalist representation. The Democratic-Republicans led by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison had been the party in power for twelve years when the war began.

President Madison had worked with John Jay and Alexander Hamilton to write the Federalist Papers to encourage constitutional ratification in 1787, but was long associated with the Democratic-Republicans by the time he was elected president in 1808.



James Madison

Even in retirement, Jay stayed committed to the Federalist cause. At the onset of the war in 1812, he offered a draft resolution to be presented at a meeting of Federalists in New York City. He wrote:

*"...the said Declaration of War is in our opinion, unnecessary and unwise; and will produce more injury than advantage to our Nation"* John Jay, June 29, 1812

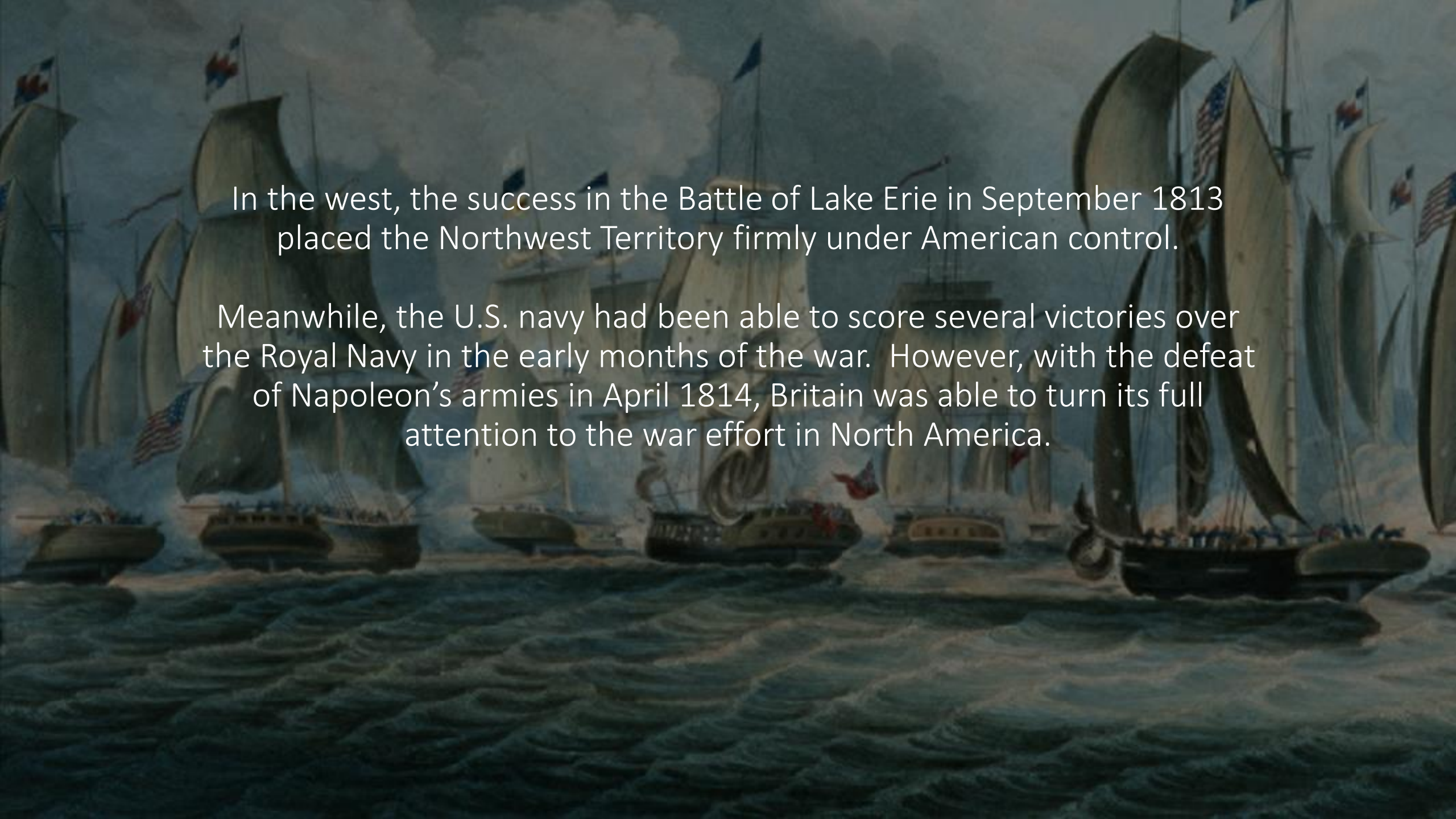
In short, Jay thought the war was unwinnable.

By late 1811 the so-called “War Hawks” in Congress were putting more and more pressure on President Madison, and on June 18, 1812, the president signed a declaration of war against Britain. Though Congress ultimately voted for war, both House and Senate were bitterly divided on the issue.

Most Western and Southern congressmen supported war, while Federalists, (especially New Englanders who relied heavily on trade with Britain), accused war advocates of using the excuse of maritime rights to promote their expansionist agenda. In order to strike at Great Britain, U.S. forces almost immediately attacked Canada, then a British colony.







In the west, the success in the Battle of Lake Erie in September 1813 placed the Northwest Territory firmly under American control.

Meanwhile, the U.S. navy had been able to score several victories over the Royal Navy in the early months of the war. However, with the defeat of Napoleon's armies in April 1814, Britain was able to turn its full attention to the war effort in North America.



As large numbers of troops arrived, British forces raided the Chesapeake Bay and moved in on the capital, capturing Washington, D.C., on August 24, 1814, and burning government buildings including the Capitol and the White House.

On September 13, 1814, Baltimore's Fort McHenry withstood 25 hours of bombardment by the British Navy. British forces subsequently left the Chesapeake Bay and began gathering their efforts for a campaign against New Orleans.

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In late 1814, Federalists met in Hartford, Connecticut to prepare a resolution to be presented to President Madison in Washington. Some party members went so far as to threaten New England's secession from the United States, but that approach was rejected. The resolution summarized the regions grievances including the accusation that Republicans in Congress were neglecting the needs of the Northeast and its large industry of seaboard manufacturers and merchants.

The group also proposed seven amendments to the Constitution that might have politically strengthened the region, including the abolition of the 3/5 clause, which allowed the slave-holding states to have increased representation in Congress, and setting a time limit on trade embargoes. The war ended before they could deliver their resolution to Madison.





The backlash from the Hartford Convention, especially the threat of secession, caused the Federalists to be labeled “disloyal” and greatly diminished the party’s ability to influence national politics.

The Federalists fielded their last candidate for president in 1816, with the party officially dissolving by the early 1820s.



By 1814 British citizens were growing weary of war time taxation and began to demand that trade reopen with America. No longer at war with France, the British government realized they had little to gain from a prolonged conflict with the United States.

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In August negotiations began in Ghent, which is in present day Belgium. During the negotiations the British had four invasions underway. One force carried out the burning of Washington, but the main mission failed in its goal of capturing Baltimore. A small force invaded the District of Maine from New Brunswick, capturing parts of northeastern Maine and several smuggling towns on the seacoast.

In northern New York, 10,000 British troops marched south to cut off New England. (They would eventually be forced to retreat after the Battle of Plattsburgh.) Nothing was known at the time of the fate of the other major invasion force that had been sent to capture New Orleans and gain control the Mississippi River.

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The British, assuming their planned invasion of New York would go well, demanded that Americans not have any naval forces on the Great Lakes and that the British get certain transit rights to the Mississippi River in exchange for continuation of American fishing rights off Newfoundland.

The American negotiators, led by John Quincy Adams, immediately rejected these demands. The American public was so outraged by these terms, that even Federalists were willing to fight on.



After months of negotiations, the parties realized that there was no real reason to continue the war. Export trade was all but paralyzed, and after the fall of Napoleon in 1814, France was no longer an enemy of Britain.

Signed in December 1814, the *Treaty of Ghent* restored relations between the two nations to *status quo ante bellum*, restoring the borders of the two countries to the lines before the war started in June 1812.

The results were in essence a draw; neither country gained or lost any territory.



The US victory at the Battle of New Orleans in January 1815 and the results of the treaty led many Americans to think that the United States had won the war.

But John Jay knew better. Upon hearing confirmation of the signing of the *Treaty of Ghent*, he wrote to his friend Judge Richard Peters,

*“...this Event will cause great and universal Joy – God grant that the Delusion which caused the War, may terminate with it.”* John Jay, March 14, 1815