AMERICAN NAVAL POLICY IN AN
AGE OF ATLANTIC WARFARE:
A CONSENSUS BROKEN AND REFORGED, 1783-1816

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By
Jeffrey J. Seiken, M.A.

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Dissertation Committee:

Professor John Guilmartin, Jr., Advisor
Professor Margaret Newell
Professor Mark Grimsley

Approved by

Advisor
History Graduate Program
ABSTRACT

In the 1780s, there was broad agreement among American revolutionaries like Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton about the need for a strong national navy. This consensus, however, collapsed as a result of the partisan strife of the 1790s. The Federalist Party embraced the strategic rationale laid out by naval boosters in the previous decade, namely that only a powerful, seagoing battle fleet offered a viable means of defending the nation's vulnerable ports and harbors. Federalists also believed a navy was necessary to protect America's burgeoning trade with overseas markets. Republicans did not dispute the desirability of the Federalist goals, but they disagreed sharply with their political opponents about the wisdom of depending on a navy to achieve these ends. In place of a navy, the Republicans with Jefferson and Madison at the lead championed an altogether different prescription for national security and commercial growth: economic coercion.

The Federalists won most of the legislative confrontations of the 1790s. But their very success contributed to the party's decisive defeat in the election of 1800 and the abandonment of their plans to create a strong blue water navy. Republican control of the government enabled Jefferson to implement what he called his “system”: commercial sanctions for deterrence; gunboats, fortifications, and the militia for coastal defense; and the commissioning of privateers and the raising of volunteer armies for offensive warfare.
The Jeffersonian system received its trial run from 1807 to 1812 and was ultimately judged a failure. Far from averting war, the use of commercial retaliation escalated the confrontation with Great Britain while also depleting the treasury and leaving the nation poorly prepared for the looming conflict. On the very eve of the war, an influential clique of young Republican politicians argued for the abandonment of Jefferson’s system and the building of a strong fleet. Their endorsement of naval expansion both before and during the War of 1812 proved instrumental in rebuilding a national consensus on the navy that transcended political divisions.
Dedicated to Liz, Abby, Amanda, and Mikhail
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VITA

March 27, 1962........................................... Born—Perth Amboy, New Jersey
1984.......................................................... B.A. English, The University of Virginia
1996.......................................................... M.A. History, The Ohio State University
1996 - 2002.............................................. Graduate Teaching Assistant
The Ohio State University
2003 – 2004.............................................. Lecturer
The Ohio State University—Newark
2005 - present.......................................... Historian
United States Air Force

PUBLICATIONS


FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: History

Areas of Emphasis: Military History, Early American History, World History
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INTRODUCTION

In his seminal work *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*, the famed naval scholar Alfred T. Mahan set forth a simple proposition that has had a lasting impact on the thinking of subsequent generations of American naval historians. Mahan embarked on the study in the hopes of deducing from the historical record certain immutable principles governing the conduct of war at sea. He ended up discerning several, but the one that took primacy over the others was the idea that naval supremacy could only be achieved by a battle fleet. To Mahan, a concentrated force of capital ships was the ultimate embodiment and expression of sea power, and the nation that could use its fleet to vanquish the enemy’s would secure a potentially decisive advantage over its adversaries. He summed up the advantages to be gained by command of the sea in one of the book’s most quoted passages:

> It is not the taking of individual ships or convoys, be they few or many, that strikes down the money power of a nation; it is the possession of that overbearing power on the sea which drives the enemy’s flag from it, or allows it to appear only as a fugitive; and which by controlling the great common, closes the highways by which commerce moves to and from the enemy’s shores. This overbearing power can only be exercised by great navies.

Mahan recognized that a nation’s stature as a sea power hinged on more than just a strong fleet. Sea power was also contingent on a number of structural features or elements—he counted six—as well as several supporting factors such as the possession of overseas
bases and an active merchant marine. Yet, for those nations that met the prerequisites—and here his message was clearly directed at his readership in the United States—a powerful navy properly employed would provide security, promote prosperity, and boost the prestige of the state. In Mahan’s view, then, sea power was a prescription for national greatness.²

Mahan derived his understanding of sea power from his investigation of naval warfare during the heyday of the sailing ship. The period from 1660-1783 saw Great Britain eclipse its principal maritime rivals in Europe, acquire a vast overseas empire, and secure a dominant position in global trade. The implicit message of Mahan’s account was that Britain owed its triumphant position on the world stage to the victories of the Royal Navy and the sea power-sensitive policies of its government. To the extent that Mahan considered the American experience in either this book or its sequel, The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812, it was more in passing and as a negative example of the consequences that befell a nation that ignored the principles he was expounding.³ It fell to two of his disciples, Harold and Margaret Sprout, to apply his theories in a thorough way to the history of the United States Navy. The Sprouts took a generally dim view of how members of either political party had handled naval matters during the formative stage of the nation’s history. While they approved of the Federalists’ pro-navy disposition, the Sprouts faulted the party’s leaders for being too wedded to a strategy based on commerce-raiding cruisers. In the Sprouts’ estimation, the Federalists’ enthusiasm for this strategy demonstrated that they possessed only a dim appreciation of the most fundamental of Mahan’s precepts—the importance of concentration of force.
While the Federalists may have been misguided, the Sprouts reserved their sharpest opprobrium for the Republicans, who were seen as being downright irresponsible in their management of the navy during the critical twelve years between the election of Thomas Jefferson and the beginning of the War of 1812. The Sprouts regarded the Jeffersonians as agrarian, anti-navy ideologues who put the nation in grave peril danger by investing millions in gunboats and coastal defense while refusing to increase the seagoing fleet before the war. The fact that this same period found the U.S. embroiled in a bitter dispute with both France and Britain over maritime rights rendered the Republicans’ aversion to naval expansion in their view all the more reprehensible.  

Over the decades, this indictment of the Jeffersonian record on naval affairs has not gone unchallenged. In the 1940s, Julia H. Macleod mounted one of the earliest and most detailed rebuttals of the charges leveled against Jefferson in an essay entitled "Jefferson and the Navy: A Defense."  Only within the last few decades, however, has there been a concerted effort to rehabilitate the reputation of the Republicans in general and Thomas Jefferson in particular on their naval decision making. Craig Symonds and Ken Hagen led this revisionist attack on Mahan and his disciples. Other historians have followed with their own reinterpretations of Republican policy. Their scholarship offers a welcome blast of fresh thinking, but if their goal was to clear the air of the Mahanian orthodoxy, they have only managed to further cloud the issue, as their attempts to vindicate Jefferson have led them to fundamentally different conclusions. On the one hand, Symonds and Hagan maintain that Jefferson consistently favored a small navy that was commensurate with the country’s resources and its security needs. James Sofka, on the other, claims that Jefferson always desired a strong navy and showed a keen
appreciation of the importance of naval power in advancing the republic’s interests in the European international order. Meanwhile, Gene Smith takes up a position somewhere in between, arguing that far from opposing the navy, Jefferson wanted to entrust the nation’s defense to a mixed force of ships-of-the-line and frigates, backed by fortifications, mobile batteries, and the militia.\textsuperscript{7} No wonder that even the Sprouts pronounced “Jefferson’s attitude toward the Navy [as] something of an enigma.”\textsuperscript{8}

This dissertation aims to get at the enigma that is Jefferson. In one sense, it is not surprising that historians have run into trouble trying to make sense of Jefferson’s position on the navy, as the Virginian was known even to contemporaries for his impulsive and sometimes freewheeling way of thinking, and his disinclination to censor his ideas or subject them to calm reflection before setting them down on paper. Alluding to this tendency, his friend of many years James Madison once remarked, “Allowances . . . ought to be made for a habit in Mr. Jefferson as in others of great genius of expressing in strong and round terms, impressions of the moment.”\textsuperscript{9} Yet, this confusion also carries with it an element of irony, for Jefferson probably wrote more on the subject of a navy than any other founder. While Jefferson’s judgments were sometimes tinged with ambivalence, he left enough of a paper trail for historians to puzzle out his views on naval issues. Where scholars have gone astray is in their attempt to find consistency and continuity in his attitudes about the navy while, in fact, his thinking changed profoundly during the course of his career. Grasping the nature of this change and its causes are the keys to comprehending the trajectory of American naval policy from the close of the Revolution through the onset of the War of 1812.
Jefferson emerges as the central historical figure of this dissertation and he never strays far from the text for two reasons, one obvious and the other less so. First, his importance simply reflects the critical part he played in the political life of the new nation, first as leader of the opposition party in the 1790s and then as president at the start of the 1800s. He had a hand in shaping the country’s naval policy in both decades, and it would be fair to say that the navy that went to war in 1812 was as much a product of his actions and decisions as the Federalists’. Second, the naval policy debates of the period were framed by two very different positions, and Jefferson finds himself in the odd situation of having contributed to the formulation of both of them. In the 1780s, Jefferson argued that a navy was necessary if the fledgling American Republic hoped to carve out a secure place for itself in the super-competitive and often highly violent Atlantic trading world. In taking this position, Jefferson was hardly alone. In fact, his views were part of a consensus that prevailed on the navy among the most prominent statesmen of the revolutionary era. A decade later, the consensus lay in tatters, a victim of the partisan strife that gave rise to the first party system. As leader and spokesman for the Republican interest in the new government, Jefferson championed economic coercion as an explicit alternative to a navy. While this concept was not entirely original either, Jefferson did claim it as his own, calling the idea of deterrence through commercial retaliations his “system.”

In one sense, the history of American naval policy during the early national period is the story of Jefferson’s argument with himself. To phrase it more broadly, though, it is the story of two competing visions for national security and commercial growth. In the end, the vision originally put forth by Jefferson and other prominent founders in the
1780s won out, but not before the second vision promoted by Jefferson and the Republican Party in the 1790s and afterwards had been given a fair trial and been found wanting.

2 Ibid., 25-89. For succinct summaries of his strategic thought, see William E. Livezey, *Mahan on Sea Power*, 2nd edition (Norman, 1981), 40-54; and Philip A. Crowl, "Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Naval Historian," in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, Peter Paret, ed. (Princeton, 1986), 444-77. For a revisionist assessment of Mahan’s thinking on sea power that takes in the full breadth of his published work, see Jon Sumida, “New Insights from Old Books: The Case of Alfred Thayer Mahan,” *Naval War College Review* LIV (Summer 2001), 100-111. Sumida is correct to take issue with reductionist readings of Mahan, but there is no denying that the primacy of the battle fleet serves as one of the central themes of *The Influence of Sea Power*, his best-known and most influential book.


6 Theodore J. Crackel attempts something similar for Jefferson’s military policy on land, offering a largely positive assessment in *Mr. Jefferson’s Army: Political and Social Reform in the Military Establishment, 1801-1809* (New York, 1987). Ironically, just as this wave of revisionist scholarship was lifting up Jefferson’s long-suffering reputation in military matters, his stature as revolutionary icon was sinking due to the searching appraisals of other aspects of his public and private life being conducted by another set of historians. See the chapter on Jefferson in Gordon S. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different* (New York, 2006), 91-117.

7 Craig Symonds, *Navalists and Antinavalists: The Naval Policy Debate in the United States, 175-1827* (Newark, 1980); Kenneth J. Hagan in *This People's Navy: The Making


Americans after the Revolution ventured forth into the Atlantic world without the benefit of a navy. During the struggle for independence, Congress had spent millions of dollars to build or buy dozens of warships. Virtually every vessel launched by the Americans, however, was either captured or destroyed in battle by the British. In desperate financial straits at war’s end, the American government in 1783 quickly moved to dispose of its naval assets. Officers and sailors were dismissed and the few surviving warships sold. For the remainder of the decade and into the next, the United States remained a fleetless nation. Americans recognized that their country possessed just about everything necessary to create a strong naval establishment: skilled shipwrights, experienced mariners, ample stocks of timber and other naval stores, and a seafaring tradition that extended back to the founding of the first colonies in the early 17th century. But a navy was a luxury the cash-starved national government could not afford, especially when it faced more immediate threats on its inland frontiers from the British, Spanish, and various groupings of Indians. In the aftermath of the Revolution, Congress devoted what meager fiscal resources it could muster toward raising a small contingent of soldiers to enforce its claims of sovereignty over the Ohio Valley.
Even though America lacked a warship to its name after 1785, many leading revolutionaries looked forward to the day when the infant republic would fulfill its naval potential. The question of whether the nation should entrust its security to a permanent force of regulars on land—a standing army in 18th century parlance—aroused intense debate and disagreement following the revolution. The issue of naval defense, however, generated nowhere near the same degree of passionate argument or divergence of opinion. Among the most prominent founders, notably George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, James Madison, and Thomas Jefferson, there was broad agreement about the strategic value of a navy. These statesmen and others believed a national navy was necessary not only for protection of the country’s lengthy maritime frontier but also for the advancement of its commercial interests in the Atlantic world which they hoped the American republic would join as a valued trading partner. Not all Americans subscribed to this view; yet, for the most part, naval advocates met with little challenge from their fellow founders in the 1780s.

The consensus on the navy did not last any longer than did the political consensus that led to the adoption of the Constitution in 1787-88. In fact, the collapse of the naval consensus was the direct result of the unraveling of the alliance among the Constitution’s supporters and the reconfiguration of political allegiances along partisan lines, with Hamilton at the head of one bloc, the Federalists, and Jefferson and Madison at the helm of the other, the Republicans. Congressional efforts to create a small cruising squadron became deeply entwined with the bitter battles that polarized the national government in the early 1790s. At the same time, conflict over naval policy served to deepen the divide between the emerging parties. By the middle of the decade, the navy had joined the
army, the funding system, the national bank, taxation, foreign relations, and construction of the Constitution as the defining issues over which Federalists and Republicans would wage battle for the next twenty years.

At the core of the disagreement about the navy lay different prescriptions for national security and commercial growth. The Federalists championed the policy propounded by naval boosters in the previous decade, namely that a navy was essential if the United States hoped to survive and prosper in the competitive universe of late 18th century European politics. In their eyes, only a powerful, seagoing battle fleet offered a viable means of defending the nation's vulnerable ports and harbors along the Atlantic seaboard. A navy was also necessary to protect America's burgeoning trade with overseas markets. The mere existence of a credible naval force, Federalists reasoned, would serve to deter aggression and ensure respect for American commercial rights. Without a navy, the nation would remain perpetually vulnerable to the vicissitudes of foreign affairs and the predatory designs of rival European governments.

Republicans during the 1790s did not necessarily dispute the desirability of the Federalist goals. They, too, recognized the importance of securing the safety of American trade and the sanctity of American territory. But party members disagreed sharply with the Federalists about the wisdom of depending on a navy to achieve these ends. Their opposition was borne of several factors. First, many Republicans sincerely doubted whether the country had the resources to build and maintain a big navy. They were also skeptical that a navy would be of much use in shielding the nation's far-flung commerce and extensive coastline from attack, especially in a war against the naval colossus of Great Britain. But beyond these practical concerns, Republicans also
opposed the Federalist naval program of the 1790s for political and ideological reasons. Republicans distrusted their rivals' motives for favoring a strong fleet and believed that the Federalists' real aim was to expand the power and reach of the national government. Republican suspicions were reinforced by a party ideology that viewed any large, permanent military force, whether on land or on water, as a potential threat to the constitutional stability of the young republic. In place of a navy, the Republicans with Jefferson and Madison at the lead proposed something altogether different: economic coercion. The Federalists feared that trade if left undefended would be an easy target for foreign aggression. Republicans turned this idea on its head. They countered that trade could be wielded as a weapon against any interfering power through sanctions that denied or restricted access to American goods and markets. Commercial retaliation was the Jeffersonian alternative, and Republicans felt certain that this system offered the surest means of securing the nation’s place in the Atlantic world. ¹

* * * *

Republican attitudes towards the navy were forged during the partisan struggles of the 1790s. But the roots of their apprehensions about military power went back several generations, to the conflict in 17th century England over the military prerogatives of the crown. In the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, Parliament conclusively settled the matter in its favor by securing William of Orange’s approval of the Bill of Rights as part of the political settlement that allowed the Dutch prince and his English wife to take the throne of England. The act prohibited the king from maintaining a peacetime army without legislative consent. Yet, while most Englishmen were satisfied with this safeguard, pamphleteers like John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon who
represented the opposition or country interest in English politics were not. Drawing on older strands of libertarian thought, opposition writers during the 1690s and early 1700s denounced standing armies as engines of oppression and tyranny. Their warnings were driven less by concerns about a military coup than by fears of the ways in which a standing army could be used to enhance royal authority. At the very least, the creation of a permanent army officered, administered, and outfitted by men beholden to the king greatly magnified the crown's opportunities for patronage. More seriously, there was always the danger that a despotic monarch might employ a standing corps of soldiers to intimidate the legislature and suppress opposition to his rule. Hence, opposition writers concluded that only a militia composed of independent, property-holding citizens could be safely entrusted with the defense of the realm.  

The opposition's condemnation of standing armies formed part of its broader attack on British government and administration in the 18th century. Country spokesmen derived their understanding of politics from 17th century republican theorists like James Harrington and Algernon Sidney, who themselves looked backwards to the writings of Renaissance and classical authorities such as Machiavelli and Polybius. Central to the country outlook was the belief that all political systems were susceptible to decay and dissolution. This principle held true even for the freest and most enlightened of states, as the downfall of ancient Athens and Rome and, more recently, Venice, Sweden, and Denmark clearly demonstrated. Thus far, England had avoided this fate due to its balanced constitution, which reduced the dangers of degeneration by distributing power between the king, lords, and commons. But country writers were convinced that agents of the crown or court interest were conspiring to destroy the balance that served as
England's chief bulwark against tyranny. The opposition accused the king's ministers of many misdeeds: manipulating parliamentary elections, distributing government offices and pensions as rewards to court supporters, and filling the commons with army officers and placemen. Critics of the court regarded all of these practices as part of a ministerial plot to corrupt Parliament and render it subservient to the crown. The opposition also deplored the effects of the new system of government finance that emerged after the 1688 Revolution. Fiscal innovations like the Bank of England, the funded debt, and an active securities market were seen as additional instruments of corruption, encouraging greed and speculation and undermining the civic virtue of the English citizenry. This nefarious combination of ministerial patronage and government by money reached its apotheosis during Robert Walpole’s long tenure as prime minister in the 1700s. To country party publicists, invocation of Walpole’s name served as a kind of shorthand for the manipulation of men and money and all of the other devious ministerial devices that had been the downfall of England’s once ideal government.

The writings of the opposition theorists never attracted a large audience in their home country. But their jeremiads about British corruption struck a responsive chord in the colonies. Trying to make sense of royal policy before the Revolution, American colonists came to see themselves as targets of a ministerial conspiracy to deprive them of their traditional rights and liberties. Americans on the eve of the Revolution also took to heart the opposition's warnings about standing armies, especially in light of their own unhappy experiences with British regulars stationed in colonial seaports. The mixed performance of the state militias during the American Revolution tempered the people's faith in the citizen-soldier. Yet, for most Americans, the war in no way diminished their
suspicion of a peacetime military force. In 1784, the Confederation government rejected George Washington's advice to keep a few thousand men under arms to police the frontier. Instead, Congress ordered the remnants of the Continental Army disbanded, declaring that "Standing armies in time of peace are inconsistent with the principles of republican government." 7 The drafting of the Constitution in 1787 also touched off a fierce and far-ranging debate over the dangers of granting the government license to "raise and support Armies." As one Antifederalist essayist reminded his readers, "By far the greater part of the different nations, who have fallen from the glorious state of liberty, owe their ruin to standing armies." 8 So deeply entrenched was this prejudice that five states during the ratification process proposed amending the Constitution to deny the government the authority to keep a standing army in peacetime. 9

While Americans during the Revolutionary era shrank from the specter of a standing army, few saw anything sinister about a professional navy. 10 The same English pamphleteers who inveighed against the dangers of a peacetime army spared the Royal Navy from censure. Opposition writers saw nothing incompatible between liberty and an overseas empire built on naval power. Far from condemning the English naval service, they praised the fleet for promoting the nation's commercial prosperity and reducing its dependence on a large army for defense. Country polemicists routinely condemned the ruling party’s foreign policy and its military adventures on the European continent, but they waxed rhapsodic when the subject turned to Britain’s mighty fleet. In the words of one of Walpole’s most vitriolic critics, the Tory aristocrat Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbrooke, “The sea is our barrier, ships our fortresses, and the navies that trade and commerce alone furnish, are the garrisons to defend them.” Opposition stalwarts
Trenchard and Gordon voiced similar judgments, as did James Burgh, who carried on with the country party tradition at the time of the American Revolution. “A Militia with the Navy [are] the only proper security of a free people in an insular situation, both against foreign invasion and domestic tyranny,” he wrote.\footnote{11}

This benign view of navies carried over to America. During the Revolution, the Continental Congress after some initial hesitation launched an ambitious program to establish a naval force. Between December 1775 and January 1777, Congress passed a series of three acts authorizing the construction of twenty frigates and three ships-of-the-line. Overall, the rebel government spent about $12 million on the Continental Navy. This hefty investment, however, delivered a disappointing return. Not one of the ships-of-the-line and only some of the frigates managed to get to sea, and those that did were soon lost to the British. All-told, over one hundred ships of all sizes and rigs were part of the Continental Navy at different points in the war, but by 1780, this impressive armada had been whittled down to two. That same year, John Adams, who more than any revolutionary had worked tirelessly to promote the development of a naval service, could only shake his head in dismay. Reviewing “the long list of vessels belonging to the United States taken and destroyed, and recollecting the whole history of the rise and progress of our navy,” Adams lamented, “it is very difficult to avoid tears.”\footnote{12} When the war ended, the short life of the Continental Navy was also brought to a close, as the debilitated state of the treasury left Congress with no other choice. With little fanfare, the navy’s last vessel, the frigate *Alliance*, was sold off in 1785.\footnote{13}

The Constitutional Convention of 1787 raised the possibility that the navy might be born anew, as the new plan of government greatly enhanced the revenue-collecting
capabilities of the state. Delegates to the convention did not see the prospect of a naval revival as particularly worrisome or even worthy of debate for the reason that the navy as an institution evoked little of the distrust or hostility with which standing armies were generally regarded. Significantly, while the Constitution limited appropriations for the army to two years, the clause giving Congress the right "to provide and maintain a Navy" carried no similar restriction. The very language employed by the framers--the use of the singular "Navy" as opposed to the plural "Armies"--also suggested that they envisioned a fleet as a permanent establishment, while military forces on land would be raised and disbanded as needed. Despite this implication, the naval provisions of the Constitution generated only scattered discussion during the ratification debates of 1787-88. Antifederalists raised some concerns about the necessity of a navy as well as the likely expense. They also worried about adding further to the federal government's already lengthy list of powers. Nonetheless, Antifederalists as a whole did not perceive a navy as presenting any particular threat to civil liberties or republican government. Indeed, Antifederalists were divided on the subject, with some going on record as supporting the creation of a navy, although they rejected the Federalist argument that scrapping the present system of government was a necessary prerequisite.

Those Americans who spoke out in favor of a navy during the Confederation period were generally nationalists--men like George Washington and Alexander Hamilton who were at the forefront of the drive for a stronger central government. Washington included a plea for a navy in his famous "Sentiments on a Peace Establishment," urging Congress to begin building a fleet as soon as its Revolutionary War debts were discharged. Hamilton also established himself as one of the leading
advocates for naval defense in his *Federalist* essays, written during the public deliberations over the Constitution in the state of New York. To Hamilton, the strategic importance of a navy was axiomatic: "If we mean to be a commercial people, or even to be secure on our Atlantic side, we must endeavor, as soon as possible, to have a navy."\(^{17}\) He predicted—quite correctly—that the danger to American commerce would be greatest during time of European war. The nation's extensive trading ties with the continent would make it impossible to steer clear of such conflicts. And he did not doubt that American shipping, if left to fend for itself, would be freely plundered by all of the belligerents. What was needed, then, was a naval force not necessarily equal to the European battle fleets but of sufficient size to be a "respectable weight if thrown into the scale of either of two contending parties." Hamilton believed that Europeans would be particularly anxious to avoid provoking American naval intervention in the West Indies, where the addition of even a few ships-of-the-line to one side or the other might determine the outcome of a campaign. "Our position is in this respect a very commanding one," he claimed, and might even be exploited to wring commercial concessions from the warring powers.\(^{18}\)

Washington and Hamilton went on to become prominent figures in Federalist politics during the 1790s, and their devotion to the doctrine of naval preparedness became an integral part of Federalist defense policy. But the ranks of nationalist politicians who supported the navy in the 1780s also included James Madison, one of the principal architects of the Constitution and Hamilton's collaborator on *The Federalist*. Madison’s subsequent career took him in a very different direction, but in the late 1780s, he fully concurred with Washington, Hamilton, and other future members of the Federalist Party...
on the importance of a strong national navy. In *Federalist* 41, he stated that he considered it among the "greatest blessings" that adoption of the Constitution would provide the unity of resources and purpose necessary to establish a navy. Besides being indispensable for security against foreign interlopers, this form of defense was also perfectly safe: "The batteries most capable of repelling foreign enterprizes on our safety, are happily such as can never be turned by a perfidious government against our liberties." On the floor of the ratification convention in Virginia, Madison again argued the necessity of a navy in a speech that anticipated exactly what would transpire during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Madison observed that in the likely event of another Anglo-French conflict, American shippers could profit greatly by picking up some of the carrying trade of the belligerents. But echoing Hamilton, Madison warned that American efforts to capitalize on this opportunity could also lead to trouble, unless the United States had sufficient naval power to compel the warring nations to honor its status as a neutral.

Hamilton and Madison's arguments on the importance of a navy were grounded in their common understanding of the history and dynamics of the European state system of the 18th century. All Americans of their generation had come of age in an era of intense competition among the great powers of Europe. While armed conflict was endemic to the European landscape and had been for centuries, the last hundred years from the Glorious Revolution of 1688 through the present formed a particularly violent epoch in the region’s history. During this period, the nations of western Europe had been engaged in five major and general wars. These wars were fought for a variety of reasons, imperial, dynastic, and political, and they were waged by shifting coalitions of states.
Yet, a consistent feature in all of them was the hostility between Britain and France, which resulted in the two kingdoms aligning themselves on opposite sides in each conflict.22

A second constant was their broad geographical scope. These conflicts were continental wars and colonial wars. And they were also fundamentally Atlantic wars, as the warring powers transformed the ocean that served as a bridge between the European and American theaters into an arena of combat as well. European states unleashed their ships-of-war as well as privately-owned vessels carrying government commissions to plunder the commerce of their opponents. The goal behind the attacks on merchant shipping was not so much to interdict enemy particular supplies or raw materials. Rather, trade was an economic activity that generated revenue for the state in the form of duties and wealth for the mercantile community that could also be taxed or borrowed in loans. Thus, commerce-raiding was intended to strike primarily at the fiscal underpinnings of the state in order to weaken its ability to carry on with the conflict.23

From the vantage point of the 1780s, Hamilton and Madison had every reason to expect the Anglo-French rivalry to continue and for the European state system to remain as unstable and prone to warfare as ever. For the newly independent American Republic, this state-of-affairs posed a dilemma. It would be safe to say that all the founders were determined to steer clear of future European conflicts by avoiding permanent political connections with any foreign nation. Indeed, a commitment to isolation represented the bedrock idea of American foreign policy of the post-revolutionary period. But complete separation from Europe was also, in another sense, impossible because of the web of commercial connections that linked America to the Old World. Most Americans
believed their future prosperity depended on the expansion of trade with European states and their colonial possessions. Thus, improving the ability of American producers to dispose of their surpluses in European markets served as another of the animating impulses behind American diplomacy. However, these same economic ties that promised to promote the general welfare of the republic under normal circumstances would also place its citizens and property at risk in the event of another Atlantic war. Hamilton and Madison both recognized that appeals to the law of nations and demands for the recognition of neutral trading rights would be insufficient to ensure the safe transit of U.S. shipping. American trading vessels would become easy prey in such an environment. This was the implicit danger Hamilton was warning about in *Federalist* 34 when he wrote, “A cloud has been for some time hanging over the European world. If it should break forth into a storm, who can insure us that in its progress a part of its fury would not be spent upon us?"  

Hamilton and Madison’s support for a navy reflected their appreciation that one of the central challenges confronting the new nation was how to protect its commerce in an Atlantic trading world that was all too susceptible to armed conflict. Their concern was shared by Madison's close friend Thomas Jefferson, who during the 1780s was even more outspoken in his advocacy of a naval armament. Jefferson's views are worth examining at length in light of the critical role he played as a policymaker during the navy's formative decades. But his ideas at this stage of his life are also important for two other reasons. First, they have been mischaracterized on occasion by historians quoting only selectively from his writings. Second, he articulated many of the fundamental assumptions about American sea power that were widely shared by naval proponents.
throughout the early national era. There is a certain irony to this, in that Jefferson after 1792 repudiated or simply ignored most of his previous pronouncements on the navy. Still, during the 1780s, no American statesmen offered a more expansive explanation of why the nation needed a navy or of how a seagoing fleet might contribute to the common defense.

Jefferson first set down in detail his thoughts on the subject in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, which he wrote and revised between 1780 and 1784. In a passage that the Federalists never tired of quoting back at him, Jefferson insisted that the navy should serve as the nation's first line of defense: "[T]he sea is the field on which we should meet an European enemy. On that element it is necessary we should possess some power." He readily acknowledged that it would be foolish to try to match the massive fleets deployed by the leading maritime states of Europe. But equality in size and numbers was unnecessary anyway for a combination of reasons. The United States' remoteness from the Old World coupled with the dynamics of the European naval balance-of-power would ensure that no hostile nation would ever dare commit its entire fleet to the western Atlantic in wartime. As Jefferson explained, "They can attack us by detachment only; and it will suffice to make ourselves equal to what they may detach." Even a somewhat smaller force would answer, since an American squadron would enjoy the significant advantage of operating close to its own bases. He concluded his analysis by estimating that voluntary contributions from the states could easily furnish enough money in one year to build and equip eighteen ships-of-the-line and twelve frigates.

To be fair to Jefferson, his words were obviously intended for the consumption of foreign readers. He was also careful to qualify his comments by explaining that they
were meant as observations only; he was not actually suggesting that Congress should immediately begin building a navy thirty vessels strong. However, after he was dispatched to Europe as part of a three-man diplomatic commission in 1784, Jefferson continued to press the case for a navy in terms that left no doubts about his earnestness. While the commission's main assignment was to secure commercial treaties with European governments, it was also given the task of negotiating with the Barbary states of Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. The rulers of these North Africa principalities regularly preyed on shipping in the Mediterranean, seizing ships and seamen for ransom. Most European nations dealt with the Barbary threat by agreeing to pay some form of tribute in exchange for the safe passage of their commerce. Congress clearly expected to do the same and appropriated $80,000 for this purpose. Jefferson, though, bristled at the idea of submitting to such extortion. In his letters and reports from Europe, he repeatedly urged the use of a naval force to bring the Barbary leaders to heel. A squadron of 150 guns, he assured fellow commissioner John Adams in 1786, would put an end to their predatory behavior. "We ought to begin a naval power, if we mean to carry on our own commerce," he wrote James Monroe two years earlier. "Can we begin it on a more honourable occasion or with a weaker foe?"

Jefferson's call for vigorous action was prompted by his concern for the safety of America's valuable trade with southern Europe. Particularly worrisome was the bellicose behavior of Algiers, which declared its hostile intentions by seizing a pair of American merchant vessels and imprisoning their crews in the summer of 1785. Nonetheless, as Jefferson's letter to Monroe indicated, he wanted a navy for reasons that transcended the nation's current troubles with the Barbary regencies. In his
correspondence, he reiterated his belief from *Notes on Virginia* about the importance of a navy for the defense of American waters. He also devoted considerable attention to discussing the other prime function of a navy: the protection of commerce. Like Hamilton and Madison, he foresaw many of the problems that would vex the nation in the 1790s and first decade of the 1800s. Without a navy to discourage or punish aggression on the high seas, he warned, American maritime rights would be trampled upon by the nations of Europe. "If we wish our commerce to be free and uninsulted, we must let these nations see that we have an energy which at present they disbelieve. The low opinion they entertain of our powers cannot fail to involve us soon in a naval war," he predicted to John Page in 1785. He amplified his views in a letter to John Jay composed a few days later. "Weakness provokes insult and injury, while a condition to punish it often prevents it. This reasoning leads to the necessity of some naval force, that being the only weapon with which we can reach an enemy." Anticipating Hamilton's line of argument from *The Federalist*, Jefferson asserted that a navy of even modest dimensions would have a deterrent value all out of proportion to its size due to America's strategic location. "Our vicinity to [the Europeans'] West India possessions and to the fisheries is a bridle which a small naval force on our part would hold in the mouths of the most powerful of these countries," he wrote.

Jefferson's pleas for a navy in the 1780s fell on deaf ears. Even John Adams was unable to muster much enthusiasm for Jefferson's proposals. Adams readily voiced his agreement with Jefferson on the general importance of a navy. But always the hard-nosed pragmatist, Adams confessed that he saw little prospect of the irresolute Confederation government taking any forceful action. Somewhat presciently, he also
cautioned Jefferson against underestimating both the difficulties and the enormous expense of waging a successful maritime war in the Mediterranean. Despite Adam's lukewarm response, Jefferson continued to believe that America, acting either alone or in concert with other European powers, should seek a naval solution to its problems with the Barbary states. "I am clear that nothing but a perpetual cruize against [the Algerines] . . . can put an end to their piracies," he informed a friend in 1790, shortly after accepting the post of Secretary of State in George Washington's newly formed administration. Two years later, outlining for Washington the different options for settling the still unresolved conflict with Algiers, he advised the president that a military response remained "the most honourable and efficious way of having peace." The first Congress that took office under the Constitution was receptive to Jefferson's views. Nonetheless, initial discussion of the Barbary issue produced nothing more conclusive than a Senate resolution in early 1791 recommending the creation of a navy as soon as the nation's finances permitted. Not until the winter of 1793-94 did Congress finally appear ready to act on Jefferson's oft-repeated advice. By then, however, Jefferson's position had shifted. So had Madison's. When the administration's supporters brought forth a bill calling for the construction of six warships in early 1794, Madison led the attack against the proposal on the floor of the House. Jefferson himself watched these proceedings from a distance, having resigned from the cabinet and returned to his family home in Monticello, Virginia over the winter. But his political friends kept him abreast of events, and he joined Madison in registering his disapproval of the naval squadron and other military preparations Congress was contemplating.
At first glance, Jefferson and Madison's abrupt retreat from their earlier support for a navy seems inconsistent if not outright puzzling. Students of Jefferson in particular have struggled to reconcile his pro-navy opinions of the 1780s with his anti-navy stance of the 1790s and later decades. But the alteration in their thinking is not difficult to account for. Their views on the navy changed because the political context changed. They had originally argued for a navy at a time when the nation was beset by a host of problems--Britain's refusal to evacuate the frontier posts in the northwest, a severe slump in the economy, the continued insolvency of the treasury, to name a few--all of which seemed to issue from a common source: the weak frame of government established by the Articles of Confederation. Fears that the union would fragment if the defects remained uncorrected provided much of the impetus behind the nationalists' calls for reform.

By the early 1790s, however, Jefferson and Madison believed that the republic was threatened by the opposite peril--that of a national government that lacked sufficient limits to its power. The development that triggered their about-face was the financial program introduced by Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton during the first two Congresses. Intended to rescue the nation from the fiscal and economic distress of the previous decade, Hamilton's master plan entailed the funding of the Confederation's war debts, assumption of the states' Revolutionary obligations, creation of a national bank, and the granting of federal assistance to domestic industry. Hamilton envisioned these measures as serving several complementary ends. They would restore the nation's credit, strengthen the ties between the government and the mercantile sector, encourage investment, and promote the orderly growth of all parts of the American economy.
While those may have been Hamilton's goals, the two Virginians saw his design in a very different light. To Jefferson, Madison, and other statesmen, especially from the South, the Treasury Secretary's program rekindled the fears of conspiracy and corruption that had been so much a part of the American Revolution and the English opposition tradition. In their eyes, his plan was nothing less than a blueprint for duplicating in America all of the evils associated with Britain's system of politics and finance. As Jefferson bluntly informed Washington in 1792, Hamilton's "system flowed from principles adverse to liberty, & was calculated to undermine and demolish the republic, by creating an influence of his department over the members of the legislature."

Jefferson's accusation stemmed from his belief that many members of Congress were profiting from the frenzied speculation in government securities and bank stock that accompanied Hamilton's program. According to Jefferson, Hamilton was employing this "corrupt squadron of paper dealers" in Congress to promote a broad interpretation of the Constitution that would effectively eliminate all barriers to the expansion of federal authority. "[T]he ultimate object of all this," Jefferson warned, "is to prepare the way for a change from the present republican form of government to that of a monarchy" along British lines.

The conflict over domestic policy produced a deep and lasting rupture in national politics, severing the ties that had joined Madison and, more tenuously, Jefferson, to Hamilton and the Federalist movement. From mid-1792 onwards, Jefferson, Madison, and other opponents of the Treasury Secretary increasingly began to see themselves as forming a distinct interest or party within the government. They adopted the name Republicans to emphasize their commitment to the principles of republicanism, leaving
the title of Federalists to Hamilton and his allies. Republicans were troubled by all aspects of Hamilton's economic program, but it was his handling of the debt that alarmed them the most. Republican leaders viewed the funding system as a font of government corruption and oppression. It was plainly designed to reward the moneyed men--namely, the merchants, financiers, and other speculators from the Northeast who had acquired much of the old debt at greatly reduced value--in order to attach these important citizens to the federal government. And while funding permitted a privileged few to fatten their fortunes at public expense, it left the burden of servicing the debt to the mass of ordinary farmers and mechanics who produced most of the nation's real wealth and, hence, taxable income. Madison aptly summarized Republican sentiments on the subject when he wrote in 1790, "I go on the principle that a Public Debt is a Public Curse and in a Rep[ublican] Govt. a greater than in any other." The worst part of Hamilton's funding plan, though, was that it sought to perpetuate the debt, to ensure that its corrosive effects would permanently blight American society and politics. Hamilton's insistence on assuming the state's Revolutionary War obligations had already inflated the national debt to a level beyond which it could be easily repaid by the present generation, Jefferson reported to Washington in mid-1792. Plans were also believed to be afoot, Jefferson told the president, to swell the debt to even greater heights.

Jefferson and other Republicans did not have to wait long to have their suspicions confirmed. The session of Congress that met during the winter of 1793-94 saw the Federalists introduce what was to date the most expensive and comprehensive program of military preparedness in the young nation's history. Besides proposing to build a navy, Federalists also sought appropriations to fortify the principal ports along the coast,
expand the regular army, and establish a network of arsenals and armories in different parts of the country. The flurry of defense-related legislation came in reaction to the French declaration of war against Britain in February 1793. This act transformed what had been a limited conflict between the revolutionary republic of France and the Old World monarchies of Austria and Prussia into a full-scale European war. Much as Hamilton and Madison had predicted during the 1780s, the eruption of hostilities on the continent spilled over into the Atlantic sea-lanes, placing American commerce in harm's way. Within months of Britain's entry into the war, Whitehall issued an Order in Council authorizing the Royal Navy to confiscate the cargoes of ships carrying provisions to enemy ports. Although the British government softened the blow by promising to compensate ship owners for spoilations, the decree served notice that London would not hesitate to abridge the rights of neutral nations when necessary. 

A second assault on American commercial interests followed fast in the wake of the first. In September 1793, the Barbary regency of Algiers agreed to a 12-month truce with Portugal. The truce was brokered by the British consul in Algiers who wanted to free up the Portuguese fleet for service against France. The nation that suffered most from the armistice, though, was the United States, which remained in a state of suspended hostilities with Algiers. No longer bottled up in the Mediterranean by the Portuguese, Algerine warships were able to cruise freely beyond the Gibraltar Straits and into the Atlantic, where unsuspecting American ships made easy prey. The dey's cruisers snared eleven U.S. merchant vessels in October and November, throwing their crews in with the handful of American captives who had been languishing in Algerine prisons since 1786. The captures made by the Algerines, however, paled besides the wholesale plunder of American trade that took
place in the Caribbean as the first year of the war wound down. In November 1793, the British government secretly approved a new Order in Council declaring a virtual blockade of the French West Indies. In the space of a few months, more than 250 American merchantmen were seized under the terms of the act, which were not made public until after the order had gone into effect.

Americans on the mainland had yet to learn of either the Algerine attacks or latest British depredations in the Caribbean when the 3rd Congress convened in the first part of December 1793. Nonetheless, the passions aroused by the expansion of the war in Europe generated controversy enough and added fuel to the partisan fires that had first been ignited by Hamilton's financial program. Republican publicists loudly proclaimed their support for France and condemned the Federalists for pursuing under the guise of neutrality a policy that prostrated the nation before Britain. That the administration would abandon a sister republic in its hour of need offered conclusive proof, Republicans contended, that the Hamiltonians were monarchists and Anglophiles at heart. It was in this highly charged, partisan atmosphere that word reached Philadelphia about the loss of the U.S. merchant ships to Algiers. In his annual address to Congress, George Washington had spoken generally of the need to be prepared for war "if we desire to secure peace." At the time, he had been thinking primarily in terms of improving the military establishment on land, but the Algerine aggression moved naval considerations to the top of the legislative agenda. In early January, the House of Representatives adopted a resolution calling for the creation of a naval force to protect American commerce against the Algerine corsairs. A few weeks later, the select committee
appointed to act on the resolution recommended the purchase or construction of four
frigates rated to carry 44 guns each and two smaller ships mounting 20 guns apiece.

The committee's report triggered an extended if intermittent debate on the floor of
the House that concluded in mid-March 1794 with passage of "An Act to provide a Naval
Armament," the law that marked the founding of the United States Navy. Most of the
discussion centered on the utility of the plan to create a navy and on whether the
proposed squadron was adequate to its intended task. But the deliberations also carried
clear partisan overtones.\textsuperscript{51} The strongest opposition came from Virginia, the state whose
delegates were at the head of the Republican movement. With Jefferson's departure from
the government at the end of 1793, de facto leadership of the Republican coalition had
fallen to Madison, who was regarded by friends and foes alike as "the great man of the
party."\textsuperscript{52} Madison opened the debate by attacking the select committee's
recommendations on pragmatic grounds. He questioned whether the proposed warships
could be readied for service within a reasonable amount of time. He wondered, too, if it
might make more sense to use the funds earmarked for a navy to negotiate with Algiers
or hire the Portuguese navy once the truce had expired. Finally, Madison also broached
the possibility that the British ministry had deliberately arranged the armistice between
Portugal and the dey as a way of striking by proxy at America's growing commercial
prosperity. If that was the case, Madison reasoned, then dispatching a naval squadron
against the Algerines might lead to a direct military confrontation with Britain.\textsuperscript{53}

These were the objections Madison raised in public, and he repeated his concerns
in his personal correspondence.\textsuperscript{54} But privately Madison also expressed his distrust of the
motives behind the entire package of military legislation the Federalists were trying to
push through Congress in the spring of 1794. Classical republican political theory had impressed upon statesmen of Madison's generation the idea that republics were fragile polities, which were particularly susceptible to subversion from within. In Hamilton's financial program, Jeffersonians believed they had already detected the contours of a monstrous conspiracy against liberty and self-rule. And to watchful and wary Republicans during the present session of Congress, Federalist efforts to strengthen the military looked ominously like new links in the same conspiratorial chain. When a leading Federalist sponsored a resolution to expand the army by 15,000 men just two days after the final voting on the navy bill, Madison outlined his fears to Jefferson:

"[Y]ou understand the game behind the curtain too well not to perceive the old trick of turning every contingency into a resource for accumulating force in the Government."

From his vantage point at Monticello, Jefferson had no trouble discerning the same sinister pattern to the Federalist actions: "As to the naval armament, the land armament, & the Marine fortifications which are in question with you, I have no doubt they will all be carried. Not that the Monocrats & Papermen in Congress want war; but they want armies & debts."  

The suspicions that Madison and Jefferson shared in private, fellow Virginian William Branch Giles did not hesitate to state in public. Giles had already acquired a reputation as a Republican firebrand and had proven to be one of Hamilton's most virulent critics in Congress. The previous year, he had spearheaded a campaign to drive the Secretary out of the government, sponsoring a series of resolutions demanding an investigation into the Treasury Department and the official censure of Hamilton. During the debate on the navy, Giles focused most of his attention on exposing the flaws in the
plan, arguing that it was neither practical nor cost-effective. But as the House prepared to vote on the bill, Giles widened his sights and took aim at the political implications of the proposal. Giles warned his colleagues that the United States was well on its way to emulating "the system of governing by debts" that had been the ruin of Europe. The true purpose of such a system, he explained, was "to devise objects of expense, and to draw the greatest possible sum from the people in the least possible mode." And it was clear to Giles that the navy bill was intended to serve both of those ends. "There is no device which facilitates the system of expense and debts so much as a Navy," he declared.57

Giles' insinuation that the Federalists wanted a navy for reasons that had nothing to do with national defense touched nerves that had already been rubbed raw by Hamilton's actions in earlier Congresses. But in justifying his opposition to the bill, Giles went beyond the impugning of specific Federalist motives for promoting the measure. Giles also issued what amounted to a blanket condemnation of all navies, insisting that such establishments brought nothing but suffering and destruction to the nations that built them. "The naval competition of the Powers in Europe has produced oppression to their subjects and ruin to themselves. The ruin of the French Monarchy, he believed, might be ascribed very much to that cause. . . . The same effect, by the same policy, will probably be produced in Great Britain."58 Giles stopped here, but over the next few years he and other Republican spokesmen would expand on this theme many times, articulating in the process a whole set of arguments about the evils of permanent navies. By the end of the 1790s, the notion that navies were inherently dangerous institutions had become deeply entwined with other strands of thought in the political ideology of the Jeffersonian
Republicans. Once fully developed, this anti-navy sentiment remained remarkably consistent in form and would outlive the first party system, persisting well into the 1820s.

Republicans found much to criticize in the proposal. But if they were adamantly opposed to creating a naval force, that does not mean they favored passive acceptance of either the Algerian or British depredations. As Republicans and Federalists argued the merits of the navy plan in early 1794, the two sides became locked in a parallel debate over a series of commercial resolutions introduced by Madison on January 3, 1794. The resolutions aimed to punish Britain by economic means, imposing a range of restrictions and penalties on British trade with America. Only a few weeks earlier, Jefferson in one of his final acts as Secretary of State had released a lengthy report to Congress detailing the many ways in which Britain's navigation laws regulated the flow of Anglo-American trade to the advantage of its own citizens. The conclusion Jefferson drew from his data was simple: American commerce and navigation must be protected "by Counter-prohibitions, Duties, and Regulations." The resolutions Madison presented on the floor of the House were designed, in part, to put Jefferson's plan into action.

In advocating the use of economic sanctions, Jefferson and Madison were following a tradition that hearkened back to the American Revolution. During the political crisis leading up to the war, the colonists had organized boycotts of British imports to pressure Parliament into revising its policies. In the 1780s, Jefferson embraced the principle of economic retaliation as one of the central elements of his commercial diplomacy during his term as American envoy in Europe. Although a fervent proponent of free trade, Jefferson was too much of a realist to believe that other nations would lower or eliminate their mercantilist barriers out of the spirit of
international fellowship. Jefferson reckoned that European governments would be willing to relax their regulations and establish reciprocal trade relations with America only if they faced the threat of retaliatory legislation. While in Europe, Jefferson never had the chance to put his theory to the test because the Confederation Congress lacked the authority to regulate foreign trade and the individual state governments refused to adopt a uniform commercial policy. But after the Constitution went into effect, Jefferson tried again, acting in concert with Madison to persuade Congress to discriminate against the shipping of nations that penalized American vessels. Although couched in general terms, their proposals were obviously targeted at the British, who monopolized the lion’s share of America’s foreign trade. Their efforts to revive the doctrine of commercial discrimination after 1789, however, were thwarted by Alexander Hamilton. Hamilton recognized that the bulk of the federal government’s annual income derived from duties collected on British imports, and he was loath to do anything that might provoke a trade war with Britain and endanger this critical source of revenue. Three times between 1789 and 1791 Hamilton used his considerable influence in Congress to help defeat the retaliatory measures advanced by Madison.59

Beaten but undeterred, Jefferson and Madison bided their time after 1791, waiting for a favorable opportunity to renew their campaign for discrimination. Before that opportunity arrived, however, Jefferson’s thinking on the subject underwent a subtle, yet significant change. As originally conceived by Jefferson in the 1770s and 1780s, commercial sanctions were a negotiating tool that could be used to pressure foreign governments into trading with America on equal terms. But their utility was limited to regulating commercial relations during peacetime. If and when the maritime powers of
Europe waged another Atlantic war, both Jefferson and Madison maintained that trade would have to be defended by a naval force capable of deterring or retaliating against foreign aggression. By early 1793, though, thick in his struggle with Hamilton over the future of the American government, the idea of creating a navy had lost its appeal to Jefferson. As the clouds of war built up on the European horizon and Jefferson pondered how the United States might ride out the impending storm, he perceived that economic retaliation might serve a valuable function in wartime, too. Sanctions could be wielded as a diplomatic weapon to dissuade the warring powers from molesting American trade with the other belligerents. Discussing the possibility that Britain and its allies might try to block the shipment of American foodstuffs to France, Jefferson observed to Madison that such an event "will furnish us a happy opportunity of setting another precious example to the world, by showing that nations may be brought to justice by appeals to their interests as well as by appeals to arms." Jefferson was confident that restitution would come quickly if, instead of resorting to war, Congress "would instantly exclude from our ports all of the manufactures, produce, vessels and subjects of the nations committing this aggression, during the continuance of the aggression and till full satisfaction made for it." 60

In suggesting this new application for commercial sanctions, Jefferson was not abandoning their original punitive purpose. In fact, the report on foreign trade Jefferson issued to Congress in December 1793 dwelt entirely on the subject of peacetime commercial relations and ended with a reprise of the traditional argument for discriminatory legislation. The full intent behind his plan of discrimination only became clear a little later, during the twin debates on the navy and Madison's commercial
resolutions that occupied Congress through the first quarter of 1794. Madison and other Republicans defended the resolves by claiming that only economic sanctions would liberate American commerce from the oppressive shackles of Britain's navigation system. But proponents of the measure also argued that sanctions would protect U.S. commerce better than any navy could by making London pay a price for its transgressions against American neutral rights and for unleashing the Algerine corsairs into the Atlantic. As Madison's compatriot, William Branch Giles, explained to the rest of the House, "Britain, and not Algiers, was the real object of the alarm, and the real source of the hostility. It was, therefore, proper to provide remedies against both." Economic reprisals were thus the preferred solution because sanctions would settle the score with Britain on all accounts.

Republicans ended up losing both legislative battles. Outside events conspired to defeat Madison’s commercial resolutions while they were still under discussion. In early March, the government at last received notice of Britain’s November Order in Council prohibiting neutral trade with the French West Indies. That news was followed a few weeks later by reports from a U.S. consul in the Caribbean describing the tremendous losses suffered by American shippers at hands of British warships and privateers. The alarming intelligence from abroad precipitated a full-scale crisis in Anglo-American relations. Even Federalists who had earlier urged moderation in dealing with London conceded that the new act was grounds for war. In the ensuing uproar, Madison’s resolves were shelved indefinitely while Congress weighed more drastic options.

The outrage over Britain’s behavior may have carried over into the navy debate as well. Final voting on the bill took place three days after Congress learned of the British
decree but before anything specific was known about its effects. Nonetheless, the initial news was jolting enough and may have been sufficient to stiffen the resolve of delegates who were still straddling the fence. Giles, for one, “observed more votes in favor of the bill since the receipt of the intelligence than before that period.”

Perhaps more important in swaying the opinion of some of the undecided, though, was the addition of a clause calling for naval construction to cease if a settlement was reached with Algiers. This amendment offered a measure of reassurance to those who were alarmed by the Algerine seizures but who hesitated to give the administration carte blanche to create a permanent navy. Whichever reason predominated, support for the proposed squadron solidified as the debate reached its denouement. In February, the select committee's recommendation to provide a naval force had been carried by a slim majority of two in the House. But when the votes were tallied in March, the bill passed the House by a comfortable 50-39 margin and sailed through the Senate without a recorded division.

In its finalized form, the Naval Act of 1794 authorized the president to build or purchase four frigates of 44 guns and two of 36 guns. Approval of the bill represented at best a limited victory for the Federalists, since the administration received only provisional permission to ready the designated naval force. The Federalists themselves were careful to emphasize that the measure was a necessary response to an immediate emergency and not the start of a long-term program of naval expansion. Yet, if the bill left the future of the navy a little fuzzy, the confrontation in Congress did clarify several things. First, it established that naval policy would be contested along partisan lines. Ten of the eleven delegates in the House who spoke in favor of the proposal were Federalists, while five out of the seven who opposed it were Republicans. The final roll
call in the House displayed a similar partisan character, with Republicans casting all but four of the 39 votes against the bill. Republican leaders both privately and, somewhat more circumspectly, in public were quick to link the proposed squadron with the Federalists’ grand scheme to drive up the debt and strengthen the hand of the national government. From this point forward, naval policy became an intensely politicized issue, one that was impossible to discuss in a non-partisan context.

Second, the debate over the bill laid bare the crucial point of contention between the two parties on the subject of the navy and the protection of commerce. Historians have sometimes explained the disagreement in terms of clashing sectional interests. Drawing most of their strength from the mercantile and shipping centers of the North and East, Federalists naturally favored an active defense of trade, while Republicans whose main base of support came from the agrarian South were indifferent if not hostile to commerce. The Federalists themselves helped foster this impression during the debate by repeatedly accusing their rivals of disregarding the concerns of the commercial sections of the country. But to characterize the Republicans as champions of agrarian self-sufficiency and opponents of commerce misses a salient point. Agriculture may indeed have been the mainstay of the southern economy, but farmers and planters in the South were heavily engaged in commercial agriculture. Even before the big cotton boom of the middle-1790s, the South as a whole accounted for roughly 40% of the nation’s exports. The anti-commercial label hardly applies to the party’s leadership either. In the early 1790s, both Jefferson and Madison had pressed for an aggressive commercial policy aimed at increasing the tonnage of American shipping and improving the nation’s access to foreign markets. As Republican speakers frequently reminded their
opponents, the question under consideration was not whether commerce should be protected, but how. And that was the point on which the two parties diverged. Federalists proposed a naval squadron to neutralize the Algerine threat. At the same time, they hoped that negotiations combined with military preparations would resolve the country’s problems with Britain. Republicans countered with a program of economic sanctions, what Jefferson had referred to a few years earlier as “my system.” Before the outbreak of war in Europe, Jefferson had envisioned his system as a way of persuading foreign governments to trade with the United States on fair and equitable terms. After 1793, Jefferson applied his system to a new and, in some ways, vastly more ambitious project: to compel the warring powers in Europe to respect American rights as a neutral nation, without resorting to expensive armies and navies that might jeopardize the safety of republican government at home. Jefferson’s ends differed little from those of the Federalists--members of both parties wanted to see the country capitalize on the economic opportunities generated by the European war. But the means he proposed were visionary in character, enabling him to dispense with the traditional methods by which nations defended their interests in the international arena. Commercial retaliation, Jefferson predicted, “would work well in many ways, safely in all, and introduce between nations another umpire other than arms.”

Jefferson would have to wait more than a decade before he had the chance to give his system a fair trial. Instead of sanctions, the Federalists turned to diplomacy in an effort to mend relations with Great Britain. In late 1794, Federalist envoy John Jay negotiated a treaty with Britain that addressed some of the principal points of conflict between the two nations. In the course of negotiations, Jay granted more concessions
than he gained, especially in the sensitive area of neutral trading rights. The Jay Treaty largely upheld the British government’s narrow interpretation of what sort of trade was permissible for neutrals during wartime. The treaty also bestowed most favorable nation status on British ships and goods, thereby foreclosing the possibility of applying discriminatory legislation against London for the ten-year duration of the agreement. For all of its unfavorable features, however, the Jay Treaty fulfilled its primary objectives. It not only avoided war, but also helped usher in a sustained period of commercial harmony between the United States and Britain.

Federalist diplomacy also brought an end to the hostilities with Algiers and, in doing so, nearly left the navy still-born. Even after Congress had passed the Naval Act of 1794, the administration continued to put out diplomatic feelers in the hopes of reaching a settlement with the dey. The Algerine ruler finally agreed to peace in late 1795, but he exacted a heavy price for his friendship. Under the terms of the treaty, the U.S. government paid more than a half-million dollars in ransom money for the captive sailors while also promising to deliver $21,600 worth of naval stores as annual tribute. The restoration of peace with Algiers came close to ending the navy before a single ship had been launched. At the time of the treaty signing, none of the frigates were anywhere close to completion. Indeed, due to delays in procuring the required timber and other difficulties, work had not progressed much beyond the laying of their keels and the partial framing of their hulls. Republicans in Congress tried to ensure that the ships stayed that way. When news of the treaty reached American shores in March 1796, Republican spokesmen called for construction to halt in accordance with clause nine of the 1794 bill. After a heated debate, Congress passed a new bill permitting completion of
three of the vessels, a compromise that was acceptable to all but twenty or so obstinate
Republicans plus a couple of others in the House. This half step, however, was as far as
any majority in Congress was willing to go. The following February, the House rejected
proposals to purchase a navy yard and timber lands for future construction. Federalist
efforts to secure funding to man and equip the three frigates when finished also went
down in defeat in early 1797.

As was the case in the clash over the original bill to create a navy, the debates in
1796 and 1797 polarized the legislature along partisan lines. But there were exceptions.
In both debates, Republicans Samuel Smith of Baltimore and John Swanwick of
Philadelphia entered the fray on the Federalists’ side and delivered several strident
speeches about the value of a navy. That the two men united with the Federalists on the
issue is not surprising considering their background: each was a prosperous merchant-
ship owner who had been elected to represent one of the country’s major commercial
seaports. Furthermore, each had started out as a Federalist and then gravitated to the
opposition for political reasons. Whether their entreaties on behalf of a navy made much
of an impact on other Republicans in 1796 and 1797 is doubtful, as the views they
espoused differed little from those of the most hardcore pro-navy Federalists.
Nonetheless, their willingness to break with the Republican leadership on naval matters
was significant, for it presaged the split between the eastern mercantile wing and the
main body of the Jeffersonian coalition that would seriously undermine Republican unity
before the War of 1812.

To some extent, the legislative battles in 1796 and 1797 rehashed the same
concerns about the cost and utility of a naval force that had been argued at length in 1794.
But these two later debates did break new ground in one important respect. In 1794, Federalists had shied away from claiming that the frigates were intended to serve as the nucleus of a permanent naval establishment. The fact that the administration went to great effort and expense to obtain southern live oak timber--the most durable wood in the world--for their frames suggests that Federalist leaders always viewed the vessels as more than a temporary addition to the nation’s armed forces. Still, supporters of the bill either ignored or denied the charge made by some critics that the ships would lay the foundation of a standing navy. In 1796 and again in 1797, however, Federalists abandoned all pretenses and readily acknowledged that that the frigates were meant to be the vanguard of a regular fighting fleet. The six warships authorized by the 1794 Act “were but a trifle,” William L. Smith of South Carolina admitted, “but they were a beginning.” History showed “that countries which now possess the largest Navies had raised them by degrees.”

Pronouncements such as this also led Federalist speakers--with some assistance from Republicans Swanwick and Smith--to address for the first time the overarching question of why the nation needed a permanent naval force. The answer they offered in speech after speech consisted of the same unvarying refrain: commerce could not prosper without one. This proposition held true under all circumstances but it applied with particular force during periods of European war. Repeating the essence of the arguments advanced by Hamilton, Madison, and Jefferson in the 1780s, pro-navy Congressmen maintained that American shipping in wartime would be interdicted and assaulted at will by the belligerents unless the United States possessed a naval force to discourage or punish such transgressions. Samuel Smith calculated that French and British seizures
had already cost American citizens upward of ten million dollars in spoilages. “[U]ntil the European nations became wise enough to cease from war," William Vans Murray of Maryland concluded, "it was necessary to provide means of defence, against their attacks.” 74 While their convictions on this point were clear, the navy's supporters had a more difficult time explaining exactly how a small fleet could protect American trade across the transatlantic sea lanes. Most expressed confidence, however, that a navy would benefit commerce by dint of its value as a deterrent. The building of even a few frigates would send a clear message to the warring nations that the U.S. government was determined to uphold its rights as a neutral and would respond to foreign aggression with military force if necessary. The word that proponents of a navy frequently used when describing the purpose of a fleet was respect, but the respect they wanted was not European admiration of the United States as a budding great power. What they sought and what they hoped a navy would bring was respect for America’s natural right as a sovereign state to carry on a lawful trade with all nations in war as well as in peace. 75 Foreign infringements of this right represented not only a violation of the law of nations but also a threat to the economic independence of the Republic and to the prospects of its future commercial growth.

Federalists persevered in this second legislative showdown with the Republicans, but their victory was still a minor one. While they had secured the right to establish a navy, it was an exceptionally meager force by any standards and the Federalists had barely been able to win congressional approval to carry through with its construction. One of the interesting aspects of these proceedings is how the modest nature of the proposals under consideration was often at odds with the tone of the debate, which sometimes bordered on the apocalyptic. But the doomsday language employed by both
sides was partly a reflection of the deep partisan divisions within the government. The intense antagonism Federalists and Republicans harbored towards each other had the effect of escalating arguments over any issue that was perceived to be a partisan one. The underlying anxieties of the principals involved also tended to inflame the rhetoric and elevate even minor disputes into matters of national importance. By the mid-1790s, a mere handful of years after the Constitution had been put in place, national leaders on both sides of the political divide still harbored doubts about the success of the American experiment in self-government. They were acutely aware that the decisions they made could have ramifications reaching far into the future—a future that in their eyes was still shrouded in uncertainty.
Historians have long grasped the centrality of economic coercion to Jefferson's foreign and commercial policy. See especially Merrill D. Peterson, "Thomas Jefferson and Commercial Policy, 1783-1793," *William and Mary Quarterly* 22 (October 1965): 584-610; Burton, Spivak, *Jefferson's English Crisis: Commerce, Embargo, and the Republican Revolution* (Charlottesville, 1979); and Doron S. Ben-Atar, *The Origins of Jeffersonian Commercial Policy and Diplomacy* (New York, 1993). Considerably less attention has been paid, however, to how Jefferson's devotion to this doctrine shaped his thinking on naval issues. A significant exception is David C. Hendrickson and Robert W. Tucker, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1990). This dissertation owes a significant intellectual debt to their finely-wrought analysis.

For the English origins of the distrust of standing armies, see Lois G. Schwoerer, "No Standing Armies!: The Antiarmy Ideology in Seventeenth-Century England* (Baltimore, 1974). By far the best analysis of how these attitudes carried over into America can be found in Lawrence D. Cress, *Citizens in Arms: The Army and the Militia in American Society to the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill, 1982).


10 While American distrust of standing armies has been amply noted and studied, almost no attention has been paid to the place of the navy in the early nation's political thought. The one notable exception is the unpublished Ph.D. dissertation by Joseph G. Henrich, "The Triumph of Ideology: The Jeffersonians and the Navy, 1779-1807" (Duke University, 1971). Unfortunately, Henrich devotes too much of his efforts to delineating the views of select Jeffersonians and not enough on exploring how these individuals and other statesmen acted on their convictions in the political arena. This flaw notwithstanding, Henrich's work is still superbly researched and thoroughly documents the ideological underpinnings of the Jeffersonian opposition to a powerful naval establishment. In tracing the historical roots of this opposition, Henrich anticipates in many ways the findings of Lance Banning about the relevance of English country party ideology to Jeffersonian political culture.


12 William M. Fowler, *Rebels Under Sail: The American Navy during the Revolution* (New York: 1976), 70-71, 215-17. The quote from Adams is on pages 262-63. Fowler concludes that it is hard to see how the American Revolution would had turned out any

13 No doubt the navy's dreary wartime record also contributed to a desire to wipe the slate clean. For an account of American naval policy (such as it was) during the Confederation years, see Marshall Smelser and Stephen T. Powers, "The Fleetless Nation, 1781-1798," in *American Secretaries of the Navy*, ed. by Paolo E. Coletta (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1980), 1:29-57.


19 *Federalist* 41, ibid., 228-29.


21 These five conflicts were the War of the League of Augsburg (1689-1697), War of Spanish Succession (1701-1714), War of Austrian Succession (1740-1748), Seven Years War (1756-1763) and the War of American Independence (1775-1783). Before the
flames of interstate rivalry burned themselves out, two more general wars erupted after the 1780s: the French Revolutionary Wars (1793-1801) and the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1815). Histories sometimes refer to the period from 1689 to 1815 as the “long eighteenth century,” while calling the series of conflicts between Britain and France the “second hundred years war.”

22 For an analysis of how the European state system as it existed in the mid-18th century was inherently unstable and promoted “systemic conflict” among its component states, see Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763-1848* (Oxford, 1994), 3-52.


24 *Federalist Papers*, 176.

25 See, especially, Craig L. Symonds, *Navalists and Antinavalists: The Naval Policy Debate in the United States, 1785-1827* (Newark, 1980), 17-25. Symonds maintains that Jefferson during the 1780s favored a small naval force capable of protecting American commerce from the Barbary states and other petty pirates of the high seas, but nothing more. Symonds' argument, however, is supported by the documentary record.


28 Jefferson began writing *Notes on Virginia* in answer to a set of questions prepared by Francois Marbois, secretary to the French legation at Philadelphia. Marbois' questionnaire sought information on the different states and was distributed to select members of the Continental Congress. Joseph Jones, one of the Virginia delegates, passed the queries on to Jefferson, who was then serving as governor of Virginia. Ibid, xi-xii.

29 For background on European and American interaction with the Barbary states, see Ray W. Irwin, *The Diplomatic Relations of the United States with the Barbary Powers, 1776-1816* (Chapel Hill, 1931), 1-36.

"Our trade to Portugal, Spain, and the Mediterranean is annihilated unless we do something decisive," he informed Horatio Gates shortly after taking up his post as commissioner in Paris. See *Papers of Jefferson*, 7:571.

Hamilton sounded an almost identical warning in *Federalist* 11: "The rights of neutrality will only be respected when they are defended by an adequate power. A nation, despicable by its weakness, forfeits even the privilege of being neutral." See *Federalist Papers*, 55.


Hence the statement by Harold and Margaret Sprout that "Jefferson's attitude toward the Navy still remains something of an enigma." See *The Rise of American Naval Power 1776-1918* (Princeton, 1967, first published 1939), 53. A few historians have tried to resolve the contradictions in Jefferson's views on the navy by denying that his outlook changed to any significant extent. Thus, in the opinion of Craig Symonds, Jefferson over the course of his political career stayed true to the position he first staked out in the 1780s--that the nation would be served best by a squadron of warships whose primary mission was the suppression of piracy. James Sofka argues the exact reverse, insisting that Jefferson consistently supported the establishment of a strong navy that could defend and advance American commercial interests abroad. According to Sofka, Jefferson opposed the
Federalists' naval initiatives of the 1790s for political reasons, but reverted to his pro-navy posture when elected president. Sofka is correct to link the shift in Jefferson's beliefs to the partisan conflict with the Federalists, but wrong in suggesting that the change was temporary. Yet, a great gulf separated the ideas Jefferson championed in the 1780s from the policies he espoused as president and in retirement during the early 1800s. See Symonds, *Navalists and Antinavalists*, 18-26, 86-87; James R. Sofka, "The Jeffersonian Idea of National Security: Commerce, the Atlantic Balance of Power, and the Barbary War, 1786-1805," *Diplomatic History* 21 (Fall 1997): 519-44. Madison’s backtracking from his nationalist stance of the 1780s has also engendered some scholarly head scratching. For an attempt to explain the apparent contradictions in his behavior, see the chapter titled “Is There a ‘James Madison Problem’?” in Gordon S. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters: What Made the Founders Different* (New York, 2006), 143-172. Wood sees Madison’s break with the Federalists as a reaction to their efforts to create a fiscal-military state in the style of the European powers, which Madison himself had never intended. Wood’s argument has much to recommend to it, yet there is no denying that Madison’s plan of government invested the American state with specific powers in the financial and military arenas--powers that he fully expected the government to exercise once the Constitution was in place.

39 For a balanced overview of the Confederation period, see Richard B. Morris, *The Forging of the Union, 1781-89* (New York, 1987). Madison's response to the trials and tribulations of the 1780s are analyzed with impressive perspicuity in Lance Banning, *The Sacred Fire of Liberty: James Madison and the Founding of the Federal Republic* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1995). Although Jefferson was absent during much of the turmoil of the Confederation years, the failure of his diplomatic mission to change the mercantilist policies adopted by most European nations convinced him that a stronger union was needed. See Doron S. Ben-Atar, *The Origins of Jeffersonian Commercial Policy and Diplomacy* (New York, 1993) 87-89.

40 The first three parts of his program were enacted into law by 1791, but Congress balked at his plan to support industry through governmental subsidies, bounties, and tariffs. See John Miller, *The Federalist Era* (New York, 1960), 33-69.


43 Party allegiances were still fluid at this point and the partisan division was limited primarily to the national level of politics. As James R. Sharp notes, even when fully
formed, the parties of this period lacked many of the features characteristic of political parties during the antebellum and later eras. For this reason, Sharp labels the Federalists and Republicans “proto-parties.” See American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis (New Haven, 1993), 33-34. His argument about the pre-modern character of the political groupings is valid; yet, acknowledgment of this point in no way diminishes the fact that partisanship was the defining feature of American politics during the early national era. For an account that looks at party development from both the top-down and bottom-up, see Sean Wilentz, The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln (New York, 2005), 40-75.

44 For a detailed examination of Republican convictions about the corrupting effect of the public debt, see Herbert Sloan, Principal and Interest: Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Debt (New York, 1995), 108-119.


46 Hamilton’s plan included a provision for a sinking fund that presumably would enable the government to pay down the principal over time. However, Edward Perkins argues that this done for cosmetic purposes to keep demand for American securities high and that it would result in no significant reduction to the debt. See American Public Finance and Financial Services, 1700-1815 (Columbus, 1994), 220-21.

47 See note 42 above.


49 “The war has kindled and brought forward the two parties with an ardour which our own interests merely could never excite," Jefferson wrote to James Monroe. See Jefferson to Monroe, June 4, 1793, Papers of Jefferson, 26:189-90. Banning provides a good account of how the events in Europe exacerbated the nascent partisan conflict in America in Jeffersonian Persuasion, 208-220. See also Sharp, American Politics, 69-91; and Ben-Atar, Jeffersonian Commercial Policy, 122-27.

50 A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, James D. Richardson, ed. (Washington, 1910), 1:132.

51 Ten of the eleven delegates who spoke in favor of the proposal were Federalists, while six out of the seven who opposed it were Republicans. The one non-Republican opponent of the measure was Abraham Clark of New Jersey, whom historians usually


53 The several short speeches Madison delivered on the navy proposal are conveniently reprinted in *Madison Papers*, 15:248-51.


55 See Gordon Wood's brilliant exposition of the mentality of 18th century politicians in "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly* 39: 401-441.


58 Ibid., 490.


63 *Annals of Congress*, 3rd Congress, 1st Session, 490.

64 Assessing the motives of delegates who switched their votes is necessarily conjectural, as none ventured to speak during the debate.

65 See note 51 above.

66 Historians have sometimes explained the voting in terms of geographical divisions, but this pattern merely reflected the sectional basis of the two parties.

Timothy Pitkin, A Statistical View of the Commerce of the United States of America (New Haven, 1835), 36-40.

The works by Drew W. McCoy, Joyce Appleby, and others have exploded the older notion that the Republicans as a whole and Jefferson and Madison in particular were hostile to commerce and instead sought to promote an economy based around the principle of agrarian self-sufficiency. See McCoy, The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America (New York, 1982; first published 1980); Appleby, Capitalism and the New Social Order: The Republican Vision of the 1790s (New York, 1984) and the essays in Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination (Cambridge, 1992), especially “The ‘Agrarian Myth’ in the Early Republic,” 253-76.

Swanwick’s business and political careers are the subject of a superb biographical sketch by Roland M. Baumann. See “John Swanwick: Spokesman for ‘Merchant-Republicanism’ in Philadelphia, 1790-1798.” The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 97 (April 1973): 131-182. Samuel Smith started out as a Federalist but by 1796 had gravitated to the Republican camp. See Frank A. Cassell, Merchant Congressman in the Young Republic: Samuel Smith of Maryland, 1752-1839 (Madison, 1971). Cassell suggests that Smith’s partnership with Republicans was a marriage of convenience designed to further his political ambitions.


At one point during the 1797 debate, William Smith produced a copy of Jefferson’s Notes on the State of Virginia and “read a pretty long extract” from it to the House. Ibid., 4th Congress, 2nd Session, 2141.

Ibid., 4th Congress, 2nd Session, 2125, 2135.
Craig Symonds also emphasizes the importance pro-navy politicians attached to respect. But he presents a misleading picture of their meaning, by divorcing their comments from the context in which they were made about the need to defend trade in wartime.
CHAPTER 2

THE QUASI-WAR AND THE TRIUMPH OF FEDERALIST
NAVAL POLICY, 1797-1801

The notion that a navy was required as a deterrent against foreign interference with American trade formed one of the core assumptions of naval advocates after the Revolution. Though the naval consensus of the 1780s was a thing of the past by the 1790s, Federalist leaders embraced this principle as one of the guiding premises of their naval policy for the duration of the party’s history. Preoccupied with other problems, however, George Washington’s administration did not try to push the issue until 1793-94, when the safety of U.S. shipping was genuinely imperiled by the actions of British and Algerine cruisers. Yet, the danger passed relatively quickly. In the mid-1790s, the administration concluded treaties with both Britain and Algiers. And as fears of further depredations subsided, so, too, did the sense of urgency that had led to passage of the Naval Act of 1794. After 1794, even some Federalists balked at following through on the plan of construction begun by the bill. Although Federalist leaders managed to salvage some of the frigates, Congress refused to permit completion of the entire squadron or to take any other steps to strengthen the navy.

Thus, by 1797, despite its backers’ best efforts, the service existed in skeletal form only, with three partially planked vessels and little else to its name. But another
foreign crisis was brewing, involving France. This second crisis breathed life into the naval program conceived during the first. By the time the conflict with France had run its course in 1800, the U.S. Navy would be fully fleshed out, with dozens of ships, a string of bases, a government bureaucracy, hundreds of officers, and thousands of seamen. Equally important, the crisis with France also provided Federalists with an opportunity to advance their naval agenda and commit the nation to a long-term program of gradual expansion. The goal of their plan was to create a fleet of ships-of-the-line and frigates capable of protecting the nation’s coastline from attack and its shipping from seizure. The Federalist triumph, though, turned out to be a bittersweet one, as their very success in pushing forward with their naval legislation contributed to the party’s decisive defeat in the election of 1800 and the scuttling of their expansionist designs by Thomas Jefferson and his incoming Republican administration.

* * *

The defusing of the war scare with Britain contributed directly to the confrontation with France. From the beginning, the French government had followed an opportunistic if erratic course in its treatment of American shipping. Hoping to benefit from the United States’ status as a neutral and to circumvent the effects of British sea power, France opened up its colonial trade to American vessels in early 1793. The authorities in Paris, however, vacillated on the issue of whether American ships carrying British goods or trading with British ports should be subject to seizure. Ratification of the Jay Treaty by Congress in 1796 ended their indecision. The recently formed Directory government denounced the treaty as a betrayal of France’s friendship. By way of retaliation, the Directors suspended diplomatic relations with the United States and
issued a series of decrees on neutral trade that amounted to a virtual declaration of war against American commerce.¹ These decrees, though, only served to legitimize the depredations that were already being committed by French ship captains in the Caribbean acting under the authority of local officials. Cut loose from the moorings of metropolitan control by revolution and war and facing the disruption of their plantation economies, government leaders in the French West Indies were unable to resist the lure of easy prize money or the chance to bring much-needed supplies into the islands.² Between July 1796 and June 1797, marauding French cruisers seized more than 300 American vessels, in some cases for pretexts as slight as not having their ship’s papers in order.

The responsibility of responding to this new assault on American neutrality fell to John Adams, who had succeeded Washington as president in 1796. Adams gained the presidency after besting the Republican candidate, Thomas Jefferson, by the narrow margin of three electoral votes. He took office, though, with something less than unanimous support from his own party. Hamilton, who had resigned from the Treasury in 1795, cared little for the prickly, independent-minded New Englander. A powerful group of Federalist politicians in Congress and the Cabinet also questioned Adams’s temperament and abilities, and they schemed to throw the election to a Federalist more amenable to their influence, Thomas Pinckney of South Carolina. After the election, disagreements over foreign and domestic affairs would only widen the rift between Adams and the Arch or High Federalists as this clique was often called, leading to a bitter, intra-party power struggle that would end in disaster at the polls in 1800.

Naval policy, however, was one critical issue on which Federalist leaders maintained a united front for the duration of the crisis with France.³ In his 8th and final
address to Congress in 1796, George Washington had urged the legislature to make due provisions for naval defense. Working from draft comments prepared by Hamilton, Washington reaffirmed the basic principle that lay at the heart of the Federalists’ naval philosophy: “[T]he most sincere Neutrality is not a sufficient guard against the depredations of Nations at War. To secure respect to a Neutral Flag, requires a Naval force, organized and ready to vindicate it, from insult or aggression.” Adams justified the need for a navy in almost identical terms in his initial communications to Congress. The specific measures he recommended to Congress during his first months in office also corresponded closely to those that Hamilton proposed privately to his political allies in the House. Both men favored combining military preparations with negotiations, which was the same approach that had worked so well in resolving the earlier crises with Britain and Algiers. Thus, Adams called on Congress in the spring of 1797 to equip the three frigates that were in their final stages of building, obtain an unspecified number of smaller ships of war for the purposes of convoying American trade, and permit merchantmen to arm in self-defense. At the same time, he announced his intention of sending a new diplomatic mission to Paris in the hopes of reaching an accommodation with the Directory.

At first, Congress agreed to outfit the three frigates but hesitated to comply with the rest of Adams’s requests for fear of antagonizing France while discussions were getting underway. However, the mood of the legislature shifted dramatically as the attacks on American trade in the Caribbean mounted and the administration’s diplomatic overtures were rebuffed. French agents greeted the American delegation in Paris with demands for a bribe of $250,000 and a loan of several million dollars more to the
Directory government as a precondition to resuming talks. When news of the XYZ affair--so-named because the French officials were referred to as X, Y, and, Z in the American dispatches--became public in the United States in the spring of 1798, the response was immediate and powerful. The treatment of the administration’s envoys released a vast outpouring of anger and outrage directed at France. Congress’s reluctance to follow through on Adams’s legislative plan vanished beneath the huge surge of patriotic feeling that swept through both chambers and the country at large. Between April and July, 1798, a steady stream of bills issued from Congress. In short order, the legislature allocated the funds needed to send the frigates United States, Constitution, and Constellation to sea, appropriated money to complete the three other frigates originally approved back in 1794, granted the administration permission to acquire twelve vessels mounting 22 or fewer guns, authorized the president to accept into service another twelve warships of varying size supplied by private citizens in exchange for government stock, and established a marine corps. Congress also took a giant stride toward ensuring the institutional permanence of the navy by creating a separate executive department for naval affairs presided over by a cabinet-level officer. This great burst of legislative activity was capped by a law passed on July 9, 1798 giving American warships the right to seize armed French vessels in the West Indies or anywhere else they might be found.

"Can we begin [a navy] on a more honourable occasion or with a weaker foe?" Jefferson had made this remark when advocating the use of force to settle the Barbary menace during the 1780s. But his observation applied with equal justice to the Quasi-War waged against France in the late 1790s. Although France possessed a first-class navy, most of it was deployed in European waters or blockaded in its bases by the British.
Thus, America’s primary adversary in the Quasi-War was not an organized naval force composed of heavily-armed warships commanded by professionals. Rather, it was a ragtag assortment of privateers, many of which were coastal or trading vessels that had been loaded up with a few guns and then sent to sea in search of defenseless merchantmen. John Adams could have hardly asked for a more ideal foe for a navy that was itself assembled in large part with ships, officers, and sailors drawn from civilian service. Spurred by the pleas of panicked ship owners, the infant American establishment grew rapidly in the second half of 1798, its operational strength rising from zero to 21 ships. The heavy frigates *United States*, *Constitution*, and *Constellation* formed the nucleus of the new navy, but they were joined by eight modified merchantmen and nine revenue cutters requisitioned from the Treasury Department. This makeshift fleet with its amateur officer corps would have been hard pressed to stand up to a squadron of French frigates in battle. Yet, the converted ships and revenue cutters were well-suited to performing the tasks that turned out to be the navy’s principal functions during the Quasi-War: escorting convoys, patrolling the sea lanes, and chasing down the odd privateer. The navy also grew progressively stronger as the buildup authorized in 1798 bore fruit. By the end of 1800, the second trio of big frigates--the *President*, *Chesapeake*, and *Congress*--had been completed along with five smaller ships and two schooners. The rapid expansion of the service was further facilitated by the decision to accept warships built by public subscription. Investors in the nation’s seaport towns funded the construction of eight additional vessels, five of which were frigates carrying over 30 guns.
The United States was also fortunate in that the man Adams selected to run the newly-christened Navy Department, a well-connected Maryland tobacco merchant and Federalist named Benjamin Stoddert, was an administrator of exceptional ability. Other than a short stint in the Continental Army, the 47-year old Stoddert lacked any real naval or military credentials to speak of. However, he had acquired valuable administrative experience while serving on Congress’s Board of War in the latter stages of the American Revolution. The business career he launched after the war also provided him with ample opportunity to develop his skills at managing men, money, and materials. Perhaps the most valuable quality he brought to his cabinet post, though, was an indomitable energy. This trait was important because the secretary position required him to shoulder a staggering load of administrative responsibilities. It was his job to supervise the construction and purchase of new ships, appoint and assign officers, oversee the equipping, manning, and refitting of vessels in port, and direct the movements of a fleet whose theater of operations stretched across a two-thousand mile arc from Trinidad to Cuba. Furthermore, he was expected to carry out his duties assisted by a tiny staff of six.\(^9\) Despite this minimal level of clerical support, Stoddert managed to keep the department running smoothly and efficiently for the duration of the Quasi-War, even as the navy expanded exponentially in size, reaching a peak strength of 32 vessels and approximately 5,000 men in late 1800.\(^{10}\)

Besides being an excellent organizer and administrator, Stoddert also proved to be a very capable strategist. Upon taking office, Stoddert quickly grasped the nature of the threat facing American shippers and the best way to counter the menace. As soon as he had gathered enough ships, Stoddert divided the navy into four squadrons and instituted a
rigorous system of patrols in the Caribbean in order to flush the French corsairs from the areas most heavily traveled by American vessels. He concentrated most of his naval assets in the Lesser Antilles, where losses to French privateers operating from Guadeloupe had been particularly severe in 1798. His plan of operations did not come off perfectly. Some of his captains exhibited a distressing tendency to abandon their stations and return to port prematurely. Coordinating the cruising schedules of his fleet was also a tricky business, especially because American sailors enlisted for only twelve months at a time. Thus, ships had to be rotated out of the West Indies on a regular basis to recruit new crews as well as to take on fresh stores and receive needed repairs. During one four-month stretch in mid-1799, the navy’s presence in the Caribbean fell to fewer than twelve vessels and American trade suffered accordingly. Aside from this one serious lapse, however, Stoddert’s efforts to suppress French privateering in the region were a resounding success. All-told, the U.S. Navy captured 94 French armed vessels and secured the release of some 70-odd American merchantmen that had been taken as prizes. The revival of American commerce in the Caribbean provided even more telling evidence of the effectiveness of the navy’s anti-privateering campaign. The overall volume of American exports to the West Indies increased by about 25% from 1798 to 1800. During the same time frame, insurance rates that had run as high as 33% on voyages to the islands declined to about 10% by the end of the war. Federalists in Congress exulted that the savings in insurance premiums alone exceeded the total cost of the navy many times over, and their claims were not far off the mark.

The Quasi-War was thus a triumphant exercise for the U.S Navy, but it was also a monotonous one that provided few opportunities for glory. Disease and accidents at sea
claimed far more lives than battle. For most officers and enlisted men, their time on active duty was largely spent patrolling the same stretch of empty ocean or shepherding American merchant ships from port to port. But the naval war with France did produce a few heroics. The 36-gun frigate Constellation commanded by ex-Revolutionary War privateersman Thomas Truxtun supplied the largest doses of drama. One of six captains originally appointed under the 1794 Naval Act, Truxtun was a skilled, experienced mariner. He was also an erudite student of naval affairs who had authored a primer on navigation and another on signaling. As commander of the Constellation, Truxtun was a stern taskmaster, but he worked to instill discipline in his green crew through positive example and light punishment rather than the heavy hand of the lash. He also exercised his men regularly at the guns. The drilling paid off when the Constellation ran across the French frigate L’Insurgente 36 off St. Kitts in February 1799. In both the way it was fought and its outcome, the engagement foreshadowed the celebrated ship-to-ship duels of the War of 1812. After some preliminary maneuvers, the two frigates squared off less than 50 yards apart and commenced firing. The close-ranged slugging match came to a close approximately sixty minutes later with the L’Insurgente so badly battered that she was little more than a hulk. A year later, Truxtun proved that his victory was no fluke when the Constellation encountered an even larger French frigate, la Vengeance 40, near Guadeloupe. The second battle took place at night and lasted considerably longer than the first, but after about five hours of trading broadsides it ended in identical fashion with the French captain hauling down his flag in defeat. Truxtun was denied the spoils of his victory when his own mainmast suddenly toppled, enabling his antagonist to slip away from the temporarily disabled Constellation in the darkness. Despite the disappointing
conclusion, Truxtun, Stoddert, and the navy’s political boosters had every reason to be gratified by the Constellation’s performance. The two battles were a testament to Truxtun’s abilities as a leader and sea captain. But more than that, they demonstrated that the heavy gun batteries carried by the American frigates and a well-trained crew made for a lethal combination. This was a fact the British would discover for themselves in the opening months of the War of 1812.

Federalists showered Truxtun with acclaim for his exploits and Congress honored him with a gold medal. But Republicans did not share in the general elation over his victories, nor did they savor the navy’s accomplishments as a whole. Although a brief lull followed Adams’ election, the political strife between the two parties reached new levels of intensity as the Quasi-War got underway. Republicans were willing to concede that France had behaved badly, but they still condemned the administration’s response as an unwarranted act of aggression. Republicans were even more dismayed by the series of bills that the Federalists steered through Congress in the wake of the XYZ affair. At the urging of Federalist leaders, Congress in 1798 not only agreed to increase the navy but also approved a massive expansion of the army. The new laws authorized the enlistment of 12,000 additional regulars for the duration of the crisis with France as well as the raising of a provisional force of 10,000 volunteers in the event of war or invasion. To pay for the vastly enlarged establishments on land and at sea, Congress gave the Treasury Department the go-ahead to borrow $5 million and collect $2 million more through a direct tax on houses, land, and slaves. Finally, the legislature passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, which granted the administration broad powers to stifle its critics by either prosecuting them or, if they were recent émigrés, shipping them back to Europe.
Federalists defended their actions as necessary for national security. By 1798, French foreign policy had taken a decidedly expansionist turn. Born forward by repeated triumphs on the battlefield, the banners of the French Republic had been planted in the Low Countries, the Rhineland, and northern Italy. But these victories seemed only to stoke France’s desire for further conquests. In May 1798, the brilliant French general Napoleon Bonaparte had set sail for Egypt at the head of one expeditionary force while another was believed to be massing for a descent on the British Isles. Most worrisome of all, the Directory was known to harbor ambitions of restoring France’s colonial empire and had been pressuring Spain to turn over Louisiana and the Floridas. In Federalist eyes, then, the possibility that the naval conflict in the Caribbean might escalate into a full-fledged war in North America was very real. Scarcely less menacing, though, was the specter of foreign agents and French sympathizers working to undermine the government and turn the American people against their own leaders. Confronted by this combination of dangers, Federalists felt that they were fully justified in doing everything possible to strengthen the nation and crack down on treasonous activity.

Republicans, of course, would have none of it. In pamphlets, the press, petitions, public addresses, and Congress, they dismissed the Federalist fears as a sham. To Republicans, it was clear that the Federalists were trying to exploit the conflict with France in order to silence the opposition and advance their political designs at home. The dispute with France “is artificial and contrived,” one writer editorialized. “A standing army, a navy, immense debt, and extravagant taxes are admirable instruments to bow the neck to obedience, and these instruments could not have been attained unless some pretext was instituted to give them legitimacy.” From mid-1798 onwards, Republican
newspapers published a steady stream of such attacks. Party leaders also turned to the state governments as part of their campaign to mobilize resistance and alert the public to the true purpose of their opponents’ actions. In December 1798, the Republican-dominated legislature of Kentucky sounded the first challenge, approving a set of resolutions drafted by Jefferson that attacked the constitutionality of the Alien and Sedition Acts. A few weeks later the Virginia legislature followed suit with a similar set of resolutions written by Madison. The Virginia assembly accompanied the resolutions with an “Address to the People” that reviewed and condemned the entire course of Federalist policy throughout the decade.

The Federalists’ program of 1798 and the Republican reaction to it produced a severe political crisis that threatened the very unity of the nation. The escalation of the partisan conflict also provided the backdrop for the final legislative battle of the 1790s over the future course of American naval policy. The showdown was precipitated in late 1798 by Benjamin Stoddert. Although the navy had grown rapidly during his first few months in office and many more ships were on the way, Stoddert felt that much greater steps still needed to be taken. He outlined his views first to Adams and then, with the president’s blessing, submitted his plans to Congress at the very end of the year. He started his report by getting right to his main point: The present safety and future security of the nation would be assured once the United States had at its command twelve ships-of-the-line, an equal number of frigates, and some 20 to 30 smaller vessels. A fleet of this size, he explained, would provide ample defense against invasion while also protecting American trade from attack. Above all, in times of European war, such a navy would help the country avoid a repeat of its present problems by making “the most powerful
nations desire our friendship--the most unprincipled respect our neutrality.” Stoddert estimated that ships mounting 74 guns could be built for a little under $350,000 apiece, while the annual costs of maintaining the navy once it had reached its desired dimensions would be about $5.4 million or a little more than double its current budget of $2.43 million. When Europe was at peace, though, the expense would drop considerably as most of the fleet could be taken out of service. Even with this qualification, the overall outlay of money would still be substantial for a government whose total income for 1798 amounted to only $8.2 million. Stoddert, however, assured Congress that the nation’s revenue would undoubtedly increase “in proportion to the increase of population.” Furthermore, the expenditures would be spread out over a number of years. All he wanted at the moment was an initial appropriation of $1.2 million to set things in motion. The money would be used to begin work on the ships-of-the-line as well as to build a half-dozen brigs or sloops, purchase timber for future projects, and construct up to three drydocks for the repair of U.S. warships.

Stoddert’s report has been called a remarkable document by one pair of naval historians, and the description is apt.21 Others had spoken of the need for a strong navy throughout the Congressional debates of the 1790s. But Stoddert was the first to quantify that need and present a precise calculation of the costs. His report also displayed an impressive breadth of vision and was shrewdly cast in very nationalistic terms. He surveyed the state of the nation’s maritime resources and made a point of emphasizing that the timber and other materials necessary for the new warships with the exception of copper could be obtained from American suppliers. Consequently, all of the financial benefits of his building program would be “distributed among our own citizens.” He also
stressed how the navy’s effectiveness as a fighting force depended upon the
establishment of a supporting network of docks, shipyards, and arsenals at key points
along the coast.

In its entirety, the memorandum easily stands as the most comprehensive, far-
ranging, and influential statement on naval policy offered by any public official during
the Federalist era. Yet, in terms of providing a strategic rationale for his proposed
expansion of the navy, Stoddert’s report contained little that other advocates of naval
preparedness had not been saying all along. Much as Jefferson had argued a decade
earlier, Stoddert maintained that a fleet of relatively modest dimensions by European
standards could still serve as an effective bulwark against foreign aggression. Given “our
geographical isolation” from Europe, a squadron of twelve ships-of-the-line would render
“an invasion of any part of our country . . . so difficult, that it could scarcely be
attempted,” he informed Congress.\footnote{22} At the same time, an expanded naval force would
be capable of wreaking havoc on European shipping lanes in the Caribbean, thus serving
notice to the warring powers that any violations of American neutrality would be met
with punishing retaliation. The only real difference between Jefferson’s views and
Stoddert’s was that when the former was writing in the mid-1780s, the perils he was
concerned about were mostly conjectural. By 1798, however, the danger had ceased to be
hypothetical. Europe was once more engulfed in a general war and, exactly as Jefferson
and others had predicted, the United States had been unable to steer clear of the ensuing
conflagration. Both Britain and France had already unleashed their cruisers on American
commerce, seizing hundreds of ships and millions of dollars’ worth of property. Of

course, the disposition of France was of the most immediate concern to Stoddert. He
hoped approval of his plan would strengthen the administration’s negotiating position by demonstrating to the Directory that the United States was determined to carry on the naval struggle to the utmost of its ability. But Stoddert was also looking beyond the present crisis to the future. As he advised Adams, “whether we are to have Peace or War with France, it will I presume, be the best policy of the Country, never again to be in a situation to invite depredations on our extensive and important commerce.”

What he aimed for was a naval force of sufficient size to provide security against all potential foes. Then, and only then, would the United States be in a position to preserve its neutral status and enjoy the fruits of peace even when the great powers of Europe were enmeshed in war.

The presentation of Stoddert’s report launched Congress into its last sustained debate over the navy for some years to come. In late January 1799, the House Naval Committee introduced a series of resolutions followed by a bill a few days later that encompassed most of the secretary’s proposals. The committee did diverge from Stoddert’s plan in one respect by recommending the addition of only six ships-of-the-line instead of twelve. The committee chair, Virginia Federalist Josiah Parker, explained the change by saying that while he agreed with Stoddert on the necessity of twelve, he also believed that six was as many as the government could afford at present. Parker and some of the other committee members probably also chose to cut the proposed number by half in the hopes that the smaller figure would generate less opposition. Since the construction of the warships would be a multi-year project anyway, there would be ample time to secure Congressional authorization to build the other six at some later date.
Even in this somewhat reduced form, however, the bill drafted by the naval
committee did not go down easily with the Republicans. Federalists spent most of the
debate on the defensive, trying to counter Republican criticisms of the planned
expansion. The most withering attacks on the bill were delivered by Albert Gallatin, a
delegate from western Pennsylvania. Gallatin had originally been elected to the Senate in
1793 but had been prevented from taking office by Federalists senators who claimed that
the Swiss-born immigrant failed to meet the constitutional requirement for nine years’
citizenship. The loss of his seat, however, turned out to be a temporary rather than
permanent setback. Pennsylvania voters returned him to the legislature in 1795, this time
as a delegate in the House. There, he promptly demonstrated that the Federalists’ desire
to keep him out of Congress had been a shrewd precaution. His upbringing in Calvinist
Geneva had imbued him with a strict sense of morality, while several years of service on
the ways and means committee in the Pennsylvania state assembly had helped him
become an expert in public finance. This combination of qualities along with the ability
to absorb and then disgorge on command an encyclopedic array of facts made him a
formidable debater in Congress and the chief scourge of the Federalists. During his
freshman term, he was relentless in pushing for greater legislative control over the
appropriations process. He also blasted the administration for consistently allowing
expenditures to exceed receipts. “We are laying the foundation of that national curse—a
growing and perpetual debt,” he warned. When one of Hamilton’s political lieutenants
challenged the accuracy of his data, Gallatin responded by writing a 200-page pamphlet
entitled *A Sketch of the Finances of the United States*. Published in late 1796, the tract
documented in exhaustive and damning detail the growth of the debt at the rate of about
$1 million a year under Federalist rule. His attacks on Federalist fiscal policy and his uncompromising demands for government frugality earned Gallatin the admiration of Jefferson and other Republicans. When Madison decided to retire from Congress in 1797, Gallatin took over his role as party leader on the floor of the House.

At the center of Gallatin’s financial philosophy lay the belief that a permanent funded debt was a millstone that would impede national progress, crush the spirit of the American people, and destroy their faith in republican government. This conviction led him, naturally enough, to cast a searching eye on ways to reduce the debt. And his gaze quickly fastened on the military. As a matter of principle, Gallatin regarded money appropriated to the military as wasteful because such expenditures drained money from the productive parts of the economy while contributing neither to the improvement nor general prosperity of the country. But he also singled out the military for the simple reason that the bulk of the government’s discretionary spending went towards its support. Thus, the military was the one place in the federal budget where substantial savings could be realized. Throughout the second half of the 1790s Gallatin fought repeatedly against the Federalists to scale back the expansion of the army. But it was the navy that became his particular bete noir. Ironically, when the question of creating a navy first came up during his aborted term as a senator, he professed to have formed no opinion as yet on the subject. By the time he reentered Congress two years later, however, all indecision on his part had vanished, replaced by a certainty that the navy was a luxury that the nation could ill afford. He opposed every one of the bills to strengthen the navy that came before Congress during the early stages of the crisis with France. And when the House in
January of 1799 turned its attention to Stoddert’s report, Gallatin took to the floor at once to do battle again.

Not surprisingly, Gallatin concentrated much of his critique on the financial side of the naval bill. He questioned among other things whether Stoddert had presented an accurate accounting of the costs, noting that the secretary’s estimates included no provisions for the repair and maintenance of the fleet. He also reminded the House that, if past experience was a reliable guide, the actual expense of the new ships would likely be far greater than the projected costs. But even if one accepted Stoddert’s calculations as correct, Gallatin argued, the government would still be unable to finance the expansion of the navy based on its current level of receipts and expenditures. Assuming that all twelve ships-of-the-line were built and placed into service as Stoddert desired, the United States would suffer a revenue shortfall of some $17.5 million by 1802. The only way to cover the deficit was through some combination of loans and taxes. And to what purpose would the money raised by these means be applied? “Not to the discharge of our present debt; not to the encouragement of agriculture, manufactures, or anything really useful to society,” he declared. On the contrary, it would all go toward a fleet “which is not to be put in commission for two years, and may not be wanted in the course of the present European war.”

Fiscal concerns aside, Gallatin also targeted in his speeches the twin premises of Federalist naval policy—namely that a navy was necessary for the defense of the coast and for the protection of trade. He dismissed the first proposition out of hand. The possibility of invasion was remote and if, by chance, the United States was attacked, he doubted that six 74s would be capable of repelling a fleet marshaled by one of the great
maritime powers of Europe. Furthermore, in the event a hostile army ever did land on American soil, he was confident that the invading force would be overwhelmed by the tens of thousands of militiamen who would rally to the country’s defense. Gallatin disagreed with the second assumption as well. Notwithstanding all of the depredations suffered by American merchantmen, imports and exports had still risen steadily during the 1790s. This trend along with the experience of such prosperous neutrals as Holland and Hamburg offered, in his view, unequivocal proof that commerce could flourish quite nicely even in the absence of protective naval force. As to Federalist claims that the navy deserved credit for the recent decline in insurance rates, Gallatin countered that the decrease was primarily due to number of other factors unrelated to the presence of American warships in the Caribbean.

While disputing the notion that the nation’s commercial fortunes would suffer without a navy, Gallatin also questioned whether the government was even obligated in every case to afford merchant shipping special protection. Many other Republicans in the late 1790s voiced similar doubts, thus feeding Federalist perceptions—and the opinions of later historians—that the Jeffersonians were hostile to commerce. In actuality, however, Republicans were not opposed to all commercial activity; rather, their criticisms were directed at a particular kind of trade—the carrying trade. With the advent of war, first France and then Spain had relaxed their navigation laws and permitted American vessels to transport cargoes to and from their colonies in the Caribbean. Many of the goods obtained from the West Indies were first shipped to American ports and then reexported to markets elsewhere in the Atlantic world. The sharp rise in freight rates brought about by wartime conditions made this a very lucrative
business for U.S. mercantile houses. By 1799, earnings from the carrying trade topped $24 million, which represented a four-fold increase over their 1790 level. During the same time frame, the value of reexports also surged from a little over $500,000 all the way up to $45 million, surpassing the value of domestic exports by a good $10 million.\(^{30}\)

Any way one looked at the numbers, it was clear that the war in Europe had generated an enormous windfall for the United States. But to Republicans, the important point was that the income derived from the carrying trade flowed exclusively to the merchants. While normal trade that entailed the sale of American goods abroad encouraged the growth of domestic industry and agriculture, the carrying trade, as Gallatin put it, “was of no direct service to the farming interest, or to the nation at large.” Yet, the expense of building a large navy to protect this type of commerce would largely be borne by the very groups of taxpaying citizens who would share in none of its profits. The Republicans’ distaste for the carrying trade gained further strength from the writings of Joseph Priestly and Thomas Cooper, two of the many transplanted British radicals who joined the Jeffersonian coalition in the 1790s. During the Quasi-War, they published a number of very influential essays on the subject. Both Priestly and Cooper deplored the carrying trade as a form of commercial speculation that was neither wholesome nor beneficial to the country. Like any speculative venture, the participants stood to reap big dividends, but “[w]ealth thus suddenly obtained, is, in many respects, detrimental to the community,” Cooper noted. “It operates as a lottery . . . [and] too often introduces ostentatious luxury, nor warranted by the sober dictates of moderate and regular gains.” The pursuit of profits through the carrying trade also diverted capital from more productive enterprises and threatened to embroil the nation in the European war. Finally,
while the drawbacks of this kind of commercial activity were substantial, the gains were ephemeral since foreign governments would undoubtedly reimpose their restrictions on commerce as soon as the current conflict had ended.

Cooper’s and Priestley’s critiques of the carrying trade made a palpable impression on the leadership of the Republican Party. Writing to Priestley in 1800, Jefferson enthused, "The papers of political arithmetic, both in yours and Mr. Cooper's pamphlets, are the most precious gifts that can be made to us; for we are running navigation mad, and commerce mad, and navy mad, which is worst of all." The distinction the Jeffersonians drew between the direct and carrying trades remained a fundamental one and would have a critical bearing on their foreign and defense policies after 1800. Republicans readily endorsed the view that every nation was entitled to dispose of its surplus commodities in vessels owned and operated by its own citizens. The right to do so was sanctioned both by natural law and by the law of nations. Republicans also considered this kind of commerce to be indispensable to the economic development of the United States. For these reasons, then, they believed that the direct trade of American exports was worth protecting and even, in the last recourse, fighting for. But neither point applied to the carrying trade, which trafficked in commodities that were neither produced nor consumed in America. To most Republicans, it made more sense to abandon the carrying trade altogether rather than spend millions of dollars for its defense and risk a collision with one of the belligerent powers in the bargain.32

The House spent much of the two weeks during which the navy bill was under consideration debating the issues Gallatin raised in his speeches. Following his lead, other Republican delegates chimed in with similar objections, insisting that Stoddert’s
program was too expensive, unlikely to produce any positive results, and unnecessary to boot. But their arguments also carried a political subtext. As always, Republicans were responding to the navy bill not just as an isolated piece of legislation that should be judged on its own merits; they also saw it as part of the Federalists’ intensifying efforts to fasten their tyrannical hold on the nation. This partisan message was muted in Congress, but it rang out loud and clear in the furious war of words waged by Jeffersonian publicists during the last two years of Adams’s administration. Party spokesmen repeatedly cited the expansion of the navy along with the Additional Army, the Sedition Law, the direct tax, and the $5 million loan when reviewing for the public the Federalists’ most serious political sins.\(^{33}\) Republican leaders had no trouble fitting these measures into a pattern that was only too familiar from the writings of English opposition theorists and from their own revolutionary experience. All were directed towards the same end of creating a supremely powerful executive, thus paving the way for the replacement of republican government with a limited or absolute monarchy.\(^{34}\)

Administration critics laid particular emphasis on the connection between Stoddert’s program and the recently approved $5 million loan. Due to concerns among potential investors, the Treasury Department decided to open the loan at 8% instead of the customary 6% rate. Republicans, not surprisingly, were appalled by everything about the loan, from its size and its terms to the fact that much of its proceeds would go towards the building of new ships that were not even needed at the present moment. But beneath these surface objections flowed deeper suspicions about their opponents’ intentions. To Republicans, the 8% loan seemed to confirm what they had been saying all along about the relationship between the funding system and Federalist defense policy--that the
repeated calls for military preparations represented little more than a thinly veiled scheme to increase the debt. More debt would ensure that the moneyed men who had attached themselves to the Federalist cause would be rewarded for their devotion long into the future. At the same time, the agricultural section of the country would have to foot the bill, leaving these citizens so oppressed and overloaded with taxes that they would be incapable of resisting the Federalists’ despotic designs. Such accusations carried somewhat of a hollow ring in the early 1790s when the army was small, the navy non-existent, and taxes limited to the impost and excise. But in 1799, with spending on the armed forces totaling more than half of the federal budget and the Federalists pushing for the major enlargement of both branches of the armed forces, the Republicans’ allegations began to sound very real indeed.

The events of 1798-99 left an indelible impression on the Republicans and served to link the navy with the worst excesses of Federalist rule in the minds of the party faithful. The great hue and cry over Stoddert’s program also led to the full flowering of the anti-navy ideology whose seeds had first been planted in 1794. Eighteenth century Americans inherited a healthy fear of standing armies from their English country party forbearers. Republicans, for the most part, simply took many of the standard arguments about the dangers of armies and applied them to navies as well. Of course, the Jeffersonians recognized that a naval force could not exactly be turned loose on the legislature or used to intimidate voters and crush dissent in the same manner that a body of professional soldiers could. Yet, standing armies were not only to be feared for their coercive potential. They were also dreaded for the indirect but no less important ways they could serve as engines of executive power and prestige. In this respect, a permanent
navy was seen by the Republicans as being every bit as threatening as a standing army. Just like an army, a navy required appointment of sizeable officer corps, thus creating a large class of men who looked to the executive for promotion and reward. The innumerable contractors, agents, and suppliers necessary to support the service further would also swell the list of government dependents. The end result was a dangerous extension of executive patronage. “When I see the current of executive influence extending itself in every direction . . . am I too jealous, when I call upon my fellow-citizens to exert all their watchfulness . . . ?” wrote one Republican Congressman from Kentucky in a public letter to his constituents justifying his opposition to the navy bill.37 History had also shown that navies were frightfully expensive to maintain and inevitably brought large debts and heavy taxes in their wake. And as Republicans only too well knew, a financial system based on deficit spending, loans, and taxes not only risked economic disaster but portended political ruin as well. Finally, navies by their very nature were regarded as terrific tools of aggression, encouraging their owning nations to retaliate against the slightest infringements of their rights or honor.38 The Republicans’ aversion to navies was perhaps best summarized by the Virginia state legislature which passed a resolution in 1800 declaring that a navy "has ever in practice been known more as an instrument of power, a source of expense, and an occasion of collisions and war with other nations, than as an instrument of defense."39

By 1800, armies and navies had come to occupy roughly same spot in Jeffersonian political thought: both were viewed as grave threats to civil liberties and the future of republican government. Not all party members, however, subscribed equally to the anti-navy ideology that took shape in the 1790s. As we have seen, a few--most
notably Samuel Smith—rejected it altogether and joined with the Federalists in championing a navy.\textsuperscript{40} It would probably be fair to say that many other Republicans opposed the Federalists’ naval plans more for practical than purely ideological reasons. Nevertheless, the arguments about the evils of a navy were repeated frequently enough and also disseminated on a sufficiently widespread basis for virtually all Republicans to be at least familiar with them. Moreover, this vision of the navy as an engine of power, corruption, and aggression very much predominated in Republican circles to the exclusion of other images.

Despite the furor raised by Stoddert’s report, the navy bill still passed for the same reasons that Congress agreed to the other measures brought forward by the Federalists during the Quasi-War. The Federalists held a clear majority in both houses heading into the 5\textsuperscript{th} Congress\textsuperscript{41} and their leaders succeeded in maintaining a high degree of party unity throughout the 1798-1799 legislative sessions.\textsuperscript{42} The anti-France hysteria generated by the XYZ disclosures also invested the Federalist program with a momentum that carried along even some Republican moderates with it. In the House, a number of Republicans crossed party lines and voted with the Federalists 54-42 to allocate $1 million for the acquisition of six ships-of-the-line and six sloops-of-war. The same day, the House also approved a pair of supplemental bills appropriating money for the purchase of timber and the construction of two dry-docks.\textsuperscript{43} After clearing the lower chamber, all three bills moved quickly through the Senate and were signed into law by John Adams on February 25, 1799.\textsuperscript{44}

Passage of the “Act for the augmentation of the Navy” was a victory of tremendous proportions for the Federalists. After years of discussion and debate, the bill
at last gave Federalists the mandate to create the sort of naval force that Washington, Hamilton, and other proponents of a battle fleet navy had been calling for since the 1780s. Having received Congress’s blessing, Stoddert proceeded to implement his program in a way that took full advantage of his discretionary control over the funds dispensed to his department. First, although Congress had voted to build only six ships-of-the-line, he ordered sufficient timber to be cut to supply the frames for eight vessels of this class. In issuing the contracts for the two extra frames, he drew on the money allocated for the additional timber.45 Far more questionable in terms of its legality was his decision to apply about $240,000 of the money designated for new construction towards the purchase and improvement of navy yards at Portsmouth, Charlestown, New York, Philadelphia, Washington, and Norfolk.46 Proposals to secure land for naval purposes had come up before in Congress, including, most recently, in July 1798, but these appeals had always been rejected or died in committee.47 As a result, through the 1790s, the building, outfitting, and repair of U.S. warships had been carried out at privately-owned sites leased by the government. Stoddert had never been happy with this arrangement and in his December 1798 report he reminded Congress of the service’s need for more extensive facilities on shore. Yet, he was curiously silent on the subject in the report’s conclusion where he described the specific measures he wished to see adopted.48 The absence of any reference to yards may have been an oversight on Stoddert’s part or he may have decided to get what he wanted without putting the question to Congress again. In any event, he waited until early 1800 before informing the newly convened 6th Congress that he intended to use part of the million dollar appropriation to acquire yards for the permanent use of the navy.
The secretary’s actions caught even John Adams by surprise. Stoddert defended his conduct to the President and Congress on the grounds of necessity. Using private yards that in some cases were too cramped and lacking in adequate storage space had proven to be both costly and inefficient when building the original six frigates. Furthermore, it seemed foolish to pour money into erecting or extending wharves and making other capital improvements on properties that did not belong to the Navy Department. In light of these considerations, Stoddert claimed that his plans to purchase the sites were entirely justified and lawful under the provisions of the 1799 act, despite the absence of any express authorization or appropriation from Congress. Stoddert’s arguments made sense in that the navy needed yards that could accommodate large ships-of-war if his building program was to move forward. Nonetheless, his interpretation of what the statute permitted rested on a shaky foundation and Congress would have been well within its rights to call a halt to the purchase of the yards or demand an inquiry into the matter. Only the fact that the Federalists still controlled both the House and the Senate spared Stoddert from having his decision challenged or even investigated.

The Federalist domination of Congress provided Stoddert with the political leverage to set his ambitious plan of expansion in motion. But the party found its ascendancy in jeopardy as the partisan conflict of the 1790s came to a climax in the election year of 1800. Public approval of Federalist policies had been running strong when the war spirit was at its height during the early stages of the conflict with France. However, the martial fever peaked and then started to subside in the first part of 1799. Expectations of war and possibly even invasion evaporated following the destruction of the French fleet at the Battle of the Nile and the formation of the Second Coalition in
Europe. As the ardor of the American public cooled in the wake of these events, support for the Federalist's measures of 1798-99 also diminished, replaced by widespread anger and unrest. Public meetings and petitions to Congress denounced the Alien and Seditions Act, the Additional Army, and, most of all, the loans and direct taxes needed to finance the military buildup as excessive and extreme. Republican leaders at both the state and nation levels skillfully capitalized on the public's discontent to rally the electorate behind Jefferson whose name was again put forward to challenge Adams for the presidency. Republican electioneering literature played off of the populace's fears of a standing army and hatred of direct taxes, painting the Federalists as power-mad monarchists who were using the crisis with France to perpetuate their rule at home. The administration's tax policy handed the Jeffersonians a particularly potent political weapon, and they took every opportunity to remind voters that their tax burdens would become permanent if the increase in the armed forces was allowed to stand.

While the Republicans forged ahead with their carefully-orchestrated campaign to capture the president's office for Jefferson, Federalist unity was fast coming unraveled. Relations between John Adams and the High Federalist wing of the party were strained to begin with and they declined precipitously after 1798. Adams himself had never favored the plan to augment the army. Like the Republicans, he believed that the danger of invasion was nonexistent and he feared that the Federalist efforts to create a classic standing army would exacerbate the tensions within the country, leading to popular unrest and perhaps even civil war. When Hamilton’s friends maneuvered to have the former Treasury Secretary appointed second-in-command of the expanded army, Adam’s opposition became complete and he did everything within his power to delay the
recruitment and organizing of the twelve additional regiments authorized by Congress.

Adams was also deeply troubled by the costs of the administration’s military program. He dreaded the effects of taxes, loans, and the debt almost as much as the Jeffersonians did. “The system of debt & taxes is levelling all governments in Europe,” he wrote the Secretary of War in mid-1799. In time, he predicted, “we must ultimately go the same way.” Adams’s concerns about spending on the military grew so great that he urged Congress in his annual address of 1799 to practice the utmost economy and even to consider curbing expenditures in the coming year if necessary.

The president’s refusal to follow the agenda laid out by the High Federalists left his critics up in arms. Their frustration turned to fury, though, when Adams informed the Senate in February 1799 that he intended to send a new diplomatic mission to France. His message took Federalist leaders in Congress and the cabinet alike by surprise since he had consulted with none of them before announcing his plans to reopen negotiations with the Directory. Hamilton and other hardliners within the party responded with outrage. In their view, Adams’ actions jeopardized the entire Federalist defense program, risked antagonizing Britain, and threatened to lull the nation into complacency at a time when greater vigilance than ever was needed. Despite their opposition, the administration’s peace initiative bore fruit. In the fall of 1800, France signed the Convention of Mortefontaine ending the Quasi-War with the United States. The rupture within the Federalist Party was not so easy to repair. No longer willing to tolerate the presence of Hamilton’s confidants in the cabinet, Adams dismissed both his Secretary of State and his Secretary of War in May 1800. Later that summer, Hamilton struck back with a pamphlet vilifying the president’s character and conduct. The combination of the popular
backlash against Federalist policies and the bitter dissension within the party’s ranks destroyed whatever chance Adams had of retaining the presidency. Jefferson won the election by eight electoral votes. Equally important, the Republican Party also gained control of both halves of Congress. The Republican victory was particularly crushing in the House, where the Federalists lost some twenty-two seats to their rivals. 53

The election of 1800 shattered Federalist political power and dealt the party a blow from which it never recovered. Before they surrendered the reins of government to Jefferson, however, a flaw in the electoral system provided Federalist leaders with one last opportunity to salvage something from their defeat. Under the existing election laws, no distinction was made between electoral votes cast for the presidential and vice-presidential candidates. Consequently, when Republican electors awarded Jefferson and his running mate Aaron Burr the exact same number of votes, the election as stipulated by the Constitution was thrown into the House of Representatives to resolve the tie. Federalists tried to capitalize on the situation by promising to support Jefferson in the balloting for president in exchange for certain concessions. 54 The Arch-Federalist ambitions of creating a large, permanent force of regulars had been doomed by the peace negotiations and even before the treaty was finalized Congress had issued orders to disband the new regiments approved in 1798. But the navy was another matter. Several prominent Federalists, Hamilton included, approached Jefferson through intermediaries, seeking his pledge that the navy would be maintained and permitted to expand as planned. They also wanted Jefferson’s assurance that he would not remove Federalist officials from government office, abandon the policy of neutrality begun by Washington, or tamper with the funding system. That Hamilton and the others included the navy in
their list of demands is a telling statement of the importance the party attached to its naval program. Jefferson rebuffed their overtures and refused to commit himself one way or the other to the Federalist conditions. Nonetheless, Republican Samuel Smith privately informed the Federalists that based on his conversations with Jefferson he was confident that the navy would not be dismantled.  

While Federalist politicians frantically tried to strike a deal with their opponents, Navy Secretary Benjamin Stoddert worked more methodically behind the scenes to prepare his department for the change in administrations and the cessation of hostilities with France. The result of his labors was the Peace Establishment Act of 1801, one of the most important if sometimes misunderstood pieces of legislation in the history of the sailing navy. The bill directed the president to sell off every naval vessel save for the thirteen frigates specified by Stoddert. Of these thirteen, six were always to be kept in commission manned by their full complement of officers but only 2/3s their normal crews, while the other seven were to be placed in ordinary. The law also called for the dismissal of more than half of the officer corps, permitting the president to retain the services of 9 captains, 36 lieutenants, and 150 midshipmen. 

Historians have generally viewed the bill as a last-ditch effort by the navy's supporters to forestall the greater cuts that would undoubtedly occur once the Republicans took office. There is some truth to this description. Federalists in the waning hours of Adams' administration were determined to preserve what they could of their policies and influence, as the infamous appointment of Federalist “midnight” judges under the Judiciary Act of 1801 demonstrated. Stoddert himself was gloomy about the navy's prospects and anxious not to leave any important naval business unresolved before
handing the department over to the Republicans. Yet, the bill as conceived by Stoddert and presented to Congress by the House Naval Affairs Committee represented more than just a desperate attempt to prevent the navy from being gutted by the Republicans. On the contrary, the Peace Act was part of a plan to establish a secure and rational foundation for the navy’s continued expansion along the lines Stoddert had described in his 1798 memorandum. He took the opportunity when delivering his valedictory report to Congress in January, 1801 to recapitulate the arguments advanced in his earlier communication while also explaining the reasoning behind the different provisions that were incorporated into the Peace Act. First and foremost, the reduction in the fleet was intended to impose order on a department that had expanded in a rapid and haphazard manner during the Quasi-War. The many former merchantmen and other light vessels taken into the service as a stopgap measure had been reasonably well-adapted to the mission of the moment. But as Stoddert explained in his report, these ships had outlived their usefulness now that peace was imminent. The converted merchant vessels had always been of marginal value while many of the others were too small or had been constructed out of poorly seasoned wood. The void left by their disposal could be easily filled in any future conflict by “the enterprising spirit of our citizens,” which would furnish an abundance of swift-sailing privateers to harass the enemy’s trade.

Besides divesting the department of those elements that Stoddert no longer considered necessary, the Peace Act was also designed to cut the navy’s operating expenses to a bare minimum while preserving one of the service’s most precious assets, its pool of officers. Once the Quasi-War was over, Stoddert recognized that a case could hardly be made for spending more than one million dollars annually to keep all thirteen
frigates in commission. By adopting the arrangements he recommended in his final report—laying up seven frigates, keeping the remaining six in service but with reduced crews, and decreasing the food ration allowed to seamen—Stoddert calculated that the entire fleet could be maintained for less than $400,000.\(^{59}\) Although he did not come out and say this in his message, the secretary no doubt hoped that the modest budget he proposed would leave Congress more inclined to allocate money towards new construction and developing the yards, the two projects he considered vital to the navy’s long-term growth. At the same time, though, the clause requiring six frigates to stay in service with their normal company of officers would ensure that a fair proportion of the officer corps would always be actively employed. In this way, the junior lieutenants and midshipmen would have the opportunity to gain further experience at sea and continue the process of training and socialization that was so critical to their professional development. In its original unamended form, the bill also contained a section providing half-pay for life to all the officers who had been dismissed under the Peace Act. These men would form a kind of naval reserve as was the practice in European navies. The partial salaries they would draw would serve as a retainer's fee, in return for which they would promise to keep the department apprised of their whereabouts and return to active duty in the event of an emergency.

Finally, the most important part of Stoddert’s plan for the post-war navy did not even appear in the Peace Act but was tucked into the Naval Appropriations Bill. This was a provision allocating $500,000 to continue building the six ships-of-the-line and improving the navy yards. In his report, Stoddert urged Congress to lay out sufficient money over the next four years to see both undertakings through to completion. He also
advised the legislature to stockpile more timber and materials that could be used to construct additional ships-of-the-line and frigates as needed. Thus, far from abandoning the ambitious program he had laid out in late 1798, Stoddert in his final dealings with Congress made every effort to see that his blueprint for the navy’s future would be carried into effect. His goal was not to create a vast establishment that would be a great drain on the public treasury during peacetime. Instead, he wanted to place the navy on as economical a footing as possible, retaining just enough vessels in service to keep the officers in fighting trim while also using the interval of peace ahead to accumulate the ships and resources necessary so that the fleet could be rapidly mobilized and expanded to meet any future national crises. “When the United States own twelve ships of seventy-four guns, and double the number of strong frigates, and it is known that they possess the means of increasing, with facility, their naval strength, confidence may be indulged that we may then avoid those wars in which we have no interest, and without submitting to be plundered,” he wrote.⁶⁰

Congress did not act on all of his recommendations. On a close vote, the House struck out the section of the Peace Act awarding half-pay to discharged officers. The debate was not recorded, but the measure probably seemed too much like creating a privileged military caste in the permanent employ of the government to be palatable to a majority of delegates, a number of Federalists included.⁶¹ The defeat on the half-pay issue was a disappointment to pro-navy Congressmen and led some of the bill's sponsors to vote against it.⁶² But Stoddert had reason enough to be satisfied because save for this one change the bill had passed in exactly the form that he had wanted it. More significantly, the Appropriations Bill cleared both chambers with the funding for the 74s
and navy yards intact. Of course, passage of the two laws provided only a frail guarantee that his plans would be complied with. There was nothing to prevent future sessions of the Republican-dominated Congress from altering or repealing the terms of Peace Act and refusing to allocate any further sums for expansion. Nonetheless, Stoddert and the Federalists could hand over control of the government knowing that they had extended the lifespan of their naval program till at least the next meeting of Congress.

With approval of Peace Act and the Naval Appropriations Bill, responsibility for the navy passed into Republican hands. The twelve years of Federalist rule closed with the party still well short of achieving the aims of its naval policy. When their opponents took office, timber for the 74s was still being felled in the Georgia woods and some of the naval yards were little more than half-developed tracts of land. If the Federalists’ goals were less than half-realized, however, their accomplishments were nevertheless substantial. Between 1797 and the end of 1800, they had managed to create a navy out of whole cloth: more than thirty vessels had been built or acquired, seven-hundred plus officers of all grades appointed, and several thousand sailors and marines enlisted. In a remarkably short space of time, this extemporized force had been organized, fitted out, and sent into combat, where it succeeded in turning back the French assault on American commerce in the West Indies. On a somewhat more mundane but no less significant note, the navy had also been thoroughly institutionalized at the federal level. The department was now run by a cabinet-level officer who presided over a compact but fully functioning staff of clerks, accountants, and purchasing agents whose duties were defined by regulation and routine. For all of these achievements the Federalists deserve full credit. Only one Republican politician, Samuel Smith of Maryland, had consistently
supported the navy’s cause during the 1790s. Otherwise, the creation and nurturing of a navy had been a purely Federalist design, pursued and implemented at every key juncture over the opposition of Republican Party leaders.

The kind of naval force that the Federalists set out to build reflected the conviction shared by Washington, Hamilton, and other party spokesmen that the nation needed a fleet of capital ships to protect its trade and territorial waters from foreign aggression. However, the specific plan of expansion that the administration embarked on in the final few years of the 1790s bore the imprint of one Federalist in particular, Benjamin Stoddert. The first navy secretary set the dimensions and laid out the timetable of the construction program approved by Congress in 1799. Acting partly on his own initiative, Stoddert had also taken other key steps to strengthen the navy, acquiring the six yards and purchasing two islands off the coast of Georgia to serve as live oak timber reserves. He also went out of his way to encourage domestic producers of copper, canvas, and hemp in the hopes of eliminating the service’s dependence on imports for these items. Assessing Stoddert’s tenure in office, the naval historian Robert G. Albion lauded the Maryland tobacco merchant as one of the three best secretaries in the history of the navy. Other scholars have largely accepted Albion’s verdict.

One aspect of Stoddert’s management that has been questioned, however, was his emphasis on ships-of-the-lines and frigates over the lesser rates. As one historian has noted, the navy’s light vessels had demonstrated their utility many times over during the Quasi-War. The purpose-built schooners and brigs in particular had had proven to be very handy when it came to escorting convoys and flushing enemy cruisers from the shallow, inshore waters where the heavy American frigates feared to tread. Yet, in
apparent indifference to the lessons of the war, he counseled Congress in early 1801 to
sell off every ship below the class of frigate.\textsuperscript{65} He also revised his estimate of the ideal
configuration of the navy, eliminating the reference to 20 or 30 smaller vessels from his
1798 report and requesting double the number of frigates instead. This criticism of
Stoddert's judgment is valid to a degree. In his desire to economize, the secretary may
have made too much of a clean sweep of things when he called for the sale of all of the
service’s small vessels. His recommendation appears even more shortsighted in view of
the fact that there was a good possibility a squadron might be dispatched to the
Mediterranean once the French treaty was ratified to counter the threat of renewed
depredations by one or more of the Barbary powers. In Stoddert's defense, however, it
should be noted that experience had shown that small vessels could be obtained quickly
in an emergency either by purchase or by crash construction. Frigates and battleships, on
other hand, were the work of several years. Thus, from Stoddert’s perspective, it made
sense to concentrate on stockpiling materials for and building the types of vessels that
could not be assembled on short notice. This was all the more true since frigates and
ships-of-the-line were, in his eyes, the two classes of warships upon which the nation’s
security would most depend.

If Stoddert’s priorities were in line with his objectives, the fundamental question
still remains as to whether his goal of creating a fleet of twelve ships-of-the-line and one-
to-two dozen frigates was achievable. Since the 74s were destined to go unfinished
before the War of 1812, one can only speculate and extrapolate from the period after
1812 when Congress resurrected the ex-secretary’s plan of expansion. Nonetheless, there
is every reason to believe that the government would have encountered numerous
obstacles trying to implement his policy. Republicans during the 1790 naval debates had pointed out some of the potential pitfalls, but others would have only become apparent if Stoddert’s program had been pursued full-bore. The first and most basic of these concerns the availability of timber. Almost all of the materials and manufactured articles necessary for large ships-of-war--from pine for the masts and spars to iron for the fastenings and anchors--could have been obtained without too much trouble from a combination of domestic and foreign sources. Finding trees of sufficient size and the proper shape from which the frames could be cut, however, was another matter. Stoddert wanted to construct the frames out of the same southern live oak used in the original frigates. However, the supply of live oak in South Carolina and Georgia turned out to be much more limited than anticipated. In the end, the civilian contractors engaged by the navy in the late 1790s succeeded in delivering enough timber for less than four frames.66 It might have been possible to get around the shortfall by substituting other hard woods such as white oak or walnut for the live oak, but the durability and longevity of the ships built with these materials could well have suffered as a result.

A second potential difficulty was the limited experience of American naval builders with the design and construction of ships-of-the-line. A few possessed some working knowledge of this ship type. English-born Josiah Fox had been trained as a shipwright in the Admiralty dockyards before becoming a constructor in the U.S. Navy. Cousins William and James Hackett of New England had also been involved in building the 74-gun America for the Continental Navy during the Revolution.67 But the department’s lead architect, Joshua Humphrey, who had designed the 1794 frigates, found himself venturing into uncharted waters when given the job of preparing plans for
the 74s. As he admitted to Stoddert’s successor, he had never even seen a vessel of that class before.\textsuperscript{68} When the navy finally resumed building ships-of-the-line during the War of 1812, the inexperience of its constructors showed, as the first 74s that rolled off the stocks were all less than satisfactory vessels. The design flaws were not ironed out until department set to work on the second generation, \textit{North Carolina} class liners a few years later.\textsuperscript{69} In all likelihood, the first two-deckers built under Stoddert’s program would have been plagued by similar imperfections.

Securing sufficient sailors to man the ships and capable officers to command them would have posed a third problem. With the tonnage of registered shipping approaching the one million mark by 1800, the United States obviously suffered from no shortage of skilled mariners.\textsuperscript{70} Yet, despite having this large seafaring population to draw from, the navy in the early 1800s had a difficult time filling its ranks for variety of reasons: naval life was disciplined and often harsh, wages lagged behind those of the merchant marine, and the standard term of enlistment was a lengthy two years. During the War of 1812, the department’s recruiting problems grew acute, although the number of oceangoing vessels in service never exceeded nine frigates and about an equal number of smaller ships. Given its troubles meeting the manpower requirements for even this modest-sized naval force, it is hard to imagine how the navy would ever have managed to attract the more than 6000 additional enlisted men needed to send a squadron of twelve ships-of-the-line to sea.\textsuperscript{71}

Officers were a different matter. Applicants to the corps were never wanting and in the first decade of the 1800s the Navy Department developed an effective if informal system for the training and promotion of midshipmen. Yet, the system worked well in
large part because the officer corps itself remained a relatively small and stable organization. Between 1802 and 1810, the navy added only 39 lieutenants to its rolls, increasing the total number from 31 to 70. However, the presence of twelve ships-of-the-line would have created at least sixty more vacancies to fill, and it is debatable whether the department could have turned out enough quality lieutenants to meet the greater demand. The navy would have also been hard-pressed to find twelve qualified captains to command the 74s out of its pool of senior officers. At the start of 1812, the navy had on hand only eleven captains and nine master commandants, and several of these due to age or other circumstances were not really fit for active duty at sea. Even assuming all twelve 74’s could be fully fitted out and manned, it would still have taken several years of training exercises before their commanders learned how to maneuver and fight as a unified squadron with some degree of proficiency.

The fourth and final stumbling block that stood in the Federalist’s path was the general question of finance. This was an issue Republicans had raised repeatedly in the debate over Stoddert’s 1798 report. They argued that the secretary had underestimated the costs while overestimating the government’s ability to pay for such a large naval force. In retrospect, his appraisal of the costs of constructing a 74-gun warship turned out to be substantially correct. Yet Gallatin and other critics were right on the mark when they pointed out that Stoddert’s calculations included no allowance for repairs and ordinary maintenance. Judging from the experiences of the post-war navy, the repair bill for a fleet of the size Stoddert wanted would have probably run upwards of $750,000 a year. His accounting was off in other ways, too. For instance, in his final report, he asserted that the extensive improvements could be made to the navy yards and dry docks
built at two of them for the total cost of $700,000. As the department would learn for itself in the 1830s, however, that sum quoted by Stoddert was barely sufficiently to cover the expense of a single dry dock. In the end, it is impossible to venture with any accuracy what the final price tag of Stoddert’s program would have been, but there can be little doubt that the total would have exceeded Stoddert’s estimates by several million dollars.

Costs alone, however, were not the only concern. The real issue was whether the American people at the turn of the 19th century would have been willing to bear the expense of a naval establishment that would have required perhaps $6-8 million to construct and another $2-3 million annually to support. Federalist leaders tried to assure anyone who would listen that with its expanding economy and growing population the nation’s fiscal resources had barely been tapped. But the party’s own experience during the 1790s suggests otherwise. Federalist efforts to generate the revenue to pay for their military buildup on land and at sea had been a political disaster. Both the excise of 1794 and the direct tax of 1798 had inspired resentment, protest, and, in a few instances, violent resistance. Raising the money through loans was also not an entirely viable option. The French conquest of the Netherlands had shut down the Dutch money market that had been the Confederation government’s chief source of loans in the 1780s. And the administration’s repeated attempts to borrow money from domestic lenders in the late 1790s had driven up interest rates to 8%, a level that even some Federalists found hard to swallow. During the height of the hysteria over the XYZ Affair, the populace had briefly rallied behind the whole of the Federalist defense package, but once the war scare faded, so, too did the party’s popular mandate. As the Federalists discovered to their misfortune
and as the Republicans would find out for themselves in the coming decade, the American people had a low tolerance for direct taxes and heavy government borrowing. Prevailing theories about public finance combined with beliefs inherited from English country party writers had instilled in many Americans a deep dislike of both. It would take the shock applied by the War of 1812 to shake this conviction and force the nation to reevaluate its attitudes towards taxation and government debt.77

For all of the reasons outlined above, it seems reasonable to conclude that Stoddert’s aspirations of assembling a fleet of twelve ships-of-the-line and two dozen frigates was simply beyond the nation’s ability in 1800. But that does not mean that a less ambitious program of expansion was impractical. Had the Federalists remained in power, they could have proceeded with Stoddert’s plan albeit at a slower pace and concentrated on completing at least four or five of the 74s authorized in 1798 and an equal number of heavy frigates. With steady work, these new vessels could certainly have been finished in the space of ten years and ready for service at the start of the War of 1812. Their construction would still have been an expensive undertaking, but the Federalists could probably have financed them without exciting too much opposition by increasing the impost on select imports. This was an option for raising government revenue that Adams’ administration did not explore during the Quasi-War, but the Republicans would employ it to excellent effect when Jefferson was president.

But these conjectures must remain within the realm of what-might-have-been because with the election of 1800 the questions about the viability of Stoddert’s plan became moot. The decisions that would determine the size, configuration, and mission of the navy in the years ahead ceased to be for Federalist leaders to make. The Federalists
had done everything in their power to develop the foundation of a strong naval establishment, but after 1800 the future of the navy rested in different hands.

2 On this point, see the very insightful analysis of the confused political situation in the French West Indies by Elkins and McKitrick, *Age of Federalism*, 647-52. They demonstrate that, the bellicose rhetoric of the Directory government in Paris notwithstanding, orders to begin seizing American ships in the Caribbean came from French commissioners on the spot. Once the attacks were in progress, however, the Directors acted as willing accomplices and made no efforts to rescind the orders or to curb the excesses of French privateers. See also Clauder, *American Commerce*, 42-46.

3 A number of historians have claimed otherwise, arguing that Hamilton and his allies showed little support for navy. See especially Manning J. Dauer, *The Adams Federalists* (Baltimore, 1953), 145-50; and Stephen J. Kurtz, *The Presidency of John Adams: The Collapse of Federalism 1795-1800* (New York, 1957), 321-25. Adams himself helped perpetuate this interpretation. Years later, he recalled, “I have always cried, Ships! Ships! Hamilton’s hobby horse was Troops! Troops!” His recollections were not entirely correct. Throughout Adams’s four years in office, Hamilton was a steadfast supporter of strengthening the navy. What he and other High Federalists objected to was Adams’ policy of favoring the navy at the expense of the army. Hamilton wanted to move forward with the expansion of both services. The quote is from Kenneth J. Hagan, *This People's Navy: The Making of American Sea Power* (New York, 1991), 43.


5 Addressing a special session of Congress convened in May 1797, Adams blamed the “sufferings of our mercantile and seafaring citizens” on the prevailing opinion among other powers that American shipping could be abused without fear of retribution. “To resist the consequences of such impressions on the minds of foreign nations . . . is an important duty of Government.” He expressed the same concern for the nation’s commercial welfare in his annual message to Congress, delivered in November 1797: Given the current international climate, Adams remarked gloomily, “there remains no reasonable ground on which to raise an expectation that a commerce without protection or defense will not be plundered.” See ibid., 223-29, 240-44.
As noted in the text, these measures matched up almost exactly with the plan of action Hamilton had outlined in a lengthy memorandum to Federalist Congressman William Smith in April 1797. See The Papers of Alexander Hamilton, Harold C. Syrett, et al., eds. (New York, 1961-1981), 21:29-41. There was a sharp difference of opinion between Hamilton and his friends in the cabinet over the propriety of resuming talks with France. See Elkins and McKitrick, Age of Federalism, 543-45. Yet, the disagreement did not extend to naval preparations. While Hamilton was writing Smith, Secretary of War James McHenry was submitting his own memorandum to John Adams advising the president to strengthen the navy by building or purchasing additional warships. See Smelser, Congress Founds a Navy, 105.

A convenient list of these laws can be found in A General Register of the Navy and Marine Corps of the United States (Washington, 1848), 238-46. The history of the subscription warships is recounted in Frederick C. Leiner, Millions for Defense: The Subscription Warships of 1798 (Annapolis, 2000).

Smelser, Congress Founds a Navy, 191.

Palmer, Stoddert’s War, 125-26.

Ibid., 128. A total of 42 vessels were on the navy’s rolls over the duration of the conflict. The figure for personnel is an estimate.

Privateers based in Guadeloupe accounted for 89 out of the 105 American merchant vessels seized by the French in 1798. See Palmer, Stoddert's War, 75.

Ibid., 41-43, 107-110.

See chart in Appendix A, ibid., 241.

The tally of recaptured merchantmen comes from Robert G. Albion and Jennie B. Pope, Sea Lanes in Wartime: The American Experience 1775-1942 (New York, 1942), 83-84. The authors do not specify the source of their information, but the figure they cite seems reasonable.

See the data and calculations in Elkins and McKitrick, Age of Federalism, 890-91.

Elkins and McKitrick provide their typically astute analysis of how the bills came to pass and why many Republicans were willing to vote for the provisional army. Ibid., 595-99.

The charge that the Federalists were militarists, which even sympathetic historians like Richard Kohn have conceded, is vigorously rebutted in Karl-Friedrich Walling, *Republican Empire: Alexander Hamilton on War and Free Government* (Lawrence, 1999).

Quoted in Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology* (Ithaca, 1978), 253. The two lines are from a ten-part series that appeared in the Philadelphia *Aurora*, one of the most influential Republican newspapers, in the spring of 1798.

Stoddert to Adams, November 11, 1798, Adams Papers, reel 392, Massachusetts Historical Society (microfilm edition); Stoddert to the House of Representatives, December 29, 1798, *American State Papers: Naval Affairs* [hereafter *ASP: NA*] (Washington, 1832-34), 1:65-66. Some years after-the-fact, Adams recalled that he disapproved of Stoddert’s plan for building ships-of-the-line, as Adams himself believed the navy should stick with frigates and lighter vessels suitable for raiding the enemy’s commerce. See Frederic H. Hayes, "John Adams and American Sea Power," *American Neptune* 25 (January 1965): 35-45. That may have been the case, but he does not appear to have voiced any objections to Stoddert’s proposal at the time. In his annual message, he even lifted a line about the need for expansion straight from the letter he had received from Stoddert. Ironically, some historians have quoted this passage as summarizing Adams’ own views on the navy. In any event, it is hard to imagine the notoriously prickly and independent-minded Adams incorporating Stoddert’s sentiments directly into his address if he opposed them. Furthermore, throughout the crisis with France, Adams in his public statements repeatedly stressed the navy’s value as a defensive force required for the protection of trade and safeguarding the coast against invasion, which is exactly in accord with Stoddert’s views. See William G. Anderson, “John Adams, the Navy, and the Quasi-War with France,” *American Neptune* 30 (April 1970): 117-32.


Stoddert to Adams, November 11, 1798, Adams Papers, reel 392.


Ibid., 2833. The printed text of his speech actually has Parker saying that he preferred eleven ships-of-the-line, but this was probably a misprint or a stenographer’s mistake.

Ibid., 2828.
That the Federalists and modern-day scholars have drawn this conclusion is understandable, as a strong vein of anti-commercial rhetoric runs through Republican political discourse of the period. Republicans repeatedly worried that an unrestrained devotion to commercial principles would warp peoples’ values and weaken their civic spirit. They also viewed with suspicion the primary agent of commerce, the merchant, who was seen as kind of social parasite, earning his livelihood from the labors of the farmer and manufacturer while producing nothing tangible himself. See Drew McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (New York, 1982; first published 1980), 170-72; Doron S. Ben-Atar, *The Origins of Jeffersonian Commercial Policy and Diplomacy* (New York, 1993), 7-8, 43-44. For the persistence of these anxieties throughout the early national period, see Steven Watts, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820* (Baltimore, 1987), 20-21, 219-222.

Historians often failed to note the distinction and so have taken Republican comments to be directed at all forms of trade/commerce.


For the tendency of Republican polemicists to condemn these acts over and over again, see Cunningham, *Jeffersonian Republicans*, 212-17; Banning, *Jeffersonian Persuasion*, 258-66, especially 266; and David H. Stewart, *The Opposition Press of the Federalist Period* (Albany, 1969), 496.

As Lawrence D. Cress notes, many Republican papers took to publishing excerpts from some of the best-known oppositionist tracts. They also reprinted some of the political literature produced by American writers during the Revolution. See Cress, *Citizens in Arms: The Army and the Militia in American Society to the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill, 1982), 209, note 2.

The extension of the antiarmy arguments to the navy was part of the process Lance Banning has dubbed the Americanization of English opposition thought. See Jeffersonian Persuasion, 129.


Conflict abroad would only promote the program of political corruption and executive domination at home. As Madison warned in 1795, “Of all the enemies to public liberty war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ of every other.”

Cited in Harold and Margaret Sprout, Rise of American Naval Power, 47n.

Ex-Federalist Samuel Smith was the only Republican to support the navy on a consistent basis in the 1790s. John Swanwick died in 1798.

There is some minor disagreement about size of the Federalist majorities in House and Senate. Based on his analysis of voting behavior, John F. Hoadley puts the breakdown at 52-45 while Manning J. Dauer judges the division to be 57-48. Determining party affiliation in the Senate is more challenging because not at all votes were recorded. Hoadley concludes that the Federalist had a19-9 advantage. Contemporary estimates closely accord with these figures. See Hoadley, Origins of American Political Parties, 1789-1803 (Lexington, 1986), 207-09; 217-18; Dauer The Adams Federalists (Baltimore, 1953), 303.

Hoadley calculates Fed cohesion to be 82.7%. Republicans also put up united front with an 86.9% cohesion level, but they were deficient in numbers to begin with and were further plagued by the absence of some of their most effective speakers from years past, especially Virginians James Madison and William Branch Giles. See Hoadley, American Political Parties, 144.

A roll call was taken only for the first bill. Annals of Congress, 5th Congress, 3rd Session, 2883.

Senate debates and votes were not recorded.

For a breakdown of the expenditures, see *ASP: NA*, 1:78-80.

The latest effort to win Congressional backing for the purchase of naval yards had been launched by Federalist Representative Robert Goodloe Harper. Harper included a resolution to this effect as part of a set of recommendations on military matters he introduced at the tail end of the 2nd meeting of the 5th Congress. Although it was referred to the Committee of the Whole on July 6, 1798, the House did not get around to discussing Harper’s resolve before adjourning ten days later. *Annals of Congress*, 5th Congress, 2nd Session, 2084, 2128.


Stoddert to Adams, April 25, 1800, reprinted in *ASP: NA*, 1:84-102; Stoddert to Adams, August 13, 1800, *Quasi-War*, 6:251-251. Some historians have depicted Stoddert and Adams as acting in unison, but from the secretary’s letters to the president, it seems clear that he was acting on his own initiative.


Many Federalists initially believed that there was more to be gained by favoring Burr over Jefferson, but eventually they decided that the election of the latter would be the lesser of two evils.

For accounts of these back-room machinations from the perspectives of some of the different principals involved, see Frank A. Cassell, *Merchant Congressman in the Young Republic: Samuel Smith of Maryland, 1752-1839* (Madison, 1971), 94-102; Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the President: The First Term, 1801-1805* (Boston, 1970), 11-16, 487-93; Sharp, *American Politics*, 256-273. During Jefferson’s second term in office, a controversy arose as to whether he had agreed to some sort of quid pro quo with the Federalists, but historians who have investigated the matter are universal in their conclusion that no political bargain was struck.


His main concern was to finalize the purchase of the sites at Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and Norfolk and to ensure that all arrangements were in place for the delivery of the timber frames and other materials for the 74s at the yards. He was also busy trying to adjust the terms of some of the timber contracts negotiated by the department. Stoddert had inadvertently set the prices too low, which was causing great hardship among the suppliers who had agreed to the rates. For details about the acquisition of the yards, see Charles O. Paullin, *Paullin's History of Naval Administration: A Collection of Articles from the U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* (Annapolis, 1968), 114-16. For the problems with the contracts, see Stoddert to William Marbury, March 12, 1801, to Thomas Jefferson, March 12, 1801, Letters to the President, Record Group 45, National Archives.

The Marine Corps was not included in this estimate. He also based his calculations on a lower rate of pay for seamen than was currently authorized.

ASP: NA, 1:75.


*Annals of Congress*, 6th Congress, 2nd Session, 958, 1051, 1052. The House made several amendments to the bill but none affected the appropriation for the 74s and yards. Unfortunately, the debates and voting on the bill were not recorded.


An 1832 Navy Department report stated that a 74-gun vessel required 34,000 cubic feet of timber for its frame. According to the same report, of the eight live-oak frames contracted for in 1799, only a little over 120,000 cubic feet was ever transported to the yards. See Levi Woodbury to the House of Representatives, December 15, 1832, “Historical Statement of the Use of Live Oak Timber . . .,” ASP:NA, IV, 191-223.
For background on Fox and the Hacketts, see Merle T. Westlake, Jr., "Josiah Fox, Gentleman, Quaker, Shipbuilder." *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 88 (July 1964), 316-27; Howard I. Chapelle, *The History of the American Sailing Navy: The Ships and their Development* (New York, 1949), 68. Although some contemporary accounts claim that William Hackett actually designed the *America*, Chapelle argues that his precise role in the design process cannot be determined on the basis of the available source material. See ibid., 82-83.

Humphreys to Robert Smith, October 7, 1801, Humphreys Letterbook, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. Humphreys is sometimes credited as being the designer of the *America*, but Chapelle presents a convincing rebuttal of the largely circumstantial evidence. See *History of the American Sailing Navy*, 79-80.

For the amount of tonnage, see Pitkin, *Statistical View*, 365. No hard data exists on the number of seamen in the United States for this time period. However, Thomas Jefferson in 1805, using the ratio of 6 sailors per 100 tons, came up with the figure of 50,000, excluding boys and slaves. A quick check of this ratio against a table in Pitkin showing both registered tonnage and seamen in different parts of the British Empire between 1814 and 1831 suggests that Jefferson’s formula provided a reasonably accurate standard of measurement. See ibid., 366; Jefferson’s notes, November 1805, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Paul Leicester Ford, ed. (New York, 1892-99), 8:405-06.

The normal complement of seamen for frigates ranged from 300 to 450, depending on the number of guns the vessel was rated for. The crew size of the ships-of-the-line was fixed at a little over 500 able and ordinary sailors.


The ships-of-the-line built by the department after the War of 1812 cost on average $366,000, as opposed to Stoddert’s original estimate of $342,000. See Woodbury to the House, December 15, 1832, “Historical Statement of the Use of Live Oak Timber . . .”, *ASP:NA*, 4:216-17.

The amount of money appropriated for the repair of the seven 74s, ten frigates, and twenty-one sloops and schooners in the navy between 1829 and 1832 averaged about $550,000. On the basis of the data it collected, the department calculated that the annual expense of repairs was equal to about 9% of the aggregate value of all of the vessels in the navy. See ibid.
Paullin, *History of Naval Administration*, 183-84.

The analysis in this paragraph is based on the exceedingly insightful essay by Herbert Sloan, “Hamilton’s Second Thoughts: Federalist Finance Revisted,” *Federalists Reconsidered*, Doron Ben-Atar and Barbara B. Oberg, eds. (Charlottesville, 1998), 41-60.
A few weeks before the balloting in the House of Representatives finally confirmed his election as president, Thomas Jefferson received a lengthy letter from Massachusetts Republican Elbridge Gerry. While most of the letter was devoted to diplomatic matters, Gerry was also anxious to share his thoughts on naval policy with Jefferson. The New Engander broached the topic in a delicate manner. He hastened to assure Jefferson that he accepted the Republican orthodoxy about the dangers of a powerful navy: “The expense and extensive operations of an immense naval establishment . . . might make us more haughty and enterprizing than ever.” He also had no desire to see “the creation of our own ‘aristocracy’” in the form of an officer corps. Yet, having acknowledged the perils of “an overgrown navy,” Gerry hoped that Jefferson would still agree to the necessity of maintaining a modest-sized force, such “as will furnish convoys to our valuable commerce, and place us, at least, above the depredations and insults of small maritime powers.”

Gerry need not have worried. Despite what many Federalists feared and more than a few Republicans probably hoped, Jefferson had no intention of eliminating the navy when he took office. Within days of his inauguration in March, his administration
was already discussing plans to send a squadron to the Mediterranean to safeguard American shipping against a renewal of Barbary aggressions.\(^3\) Jefferson’s main priority as president was to undo the damage wrought by more than a decade of Federalist rule. The Federalists had sought to enlarge the federal government’s sphere of authority. Believing that government should take an active role in the economic life of the nation, they had monetized the debt, established a national bank, and promoted the development of industry. In response to Indian troubles in the west and dangers from abroad, they had also created a sizable military establishment funded in part by taxes and loans. And when their rule had been challenged or in some cases defied, they had not hesitated to use the power of the government to quell the unrest. All of this, of course, was anathema to the Republicans. In his inaugural address Jefferson promised a return to “wise and frugal Government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned.”\(^4\) These were the basic ideals that would direct the course of his administration.

Foremost among his goals was the extermination of the public debt. Heavy spending during the Quasi-War had swelled the debt to $83 million by the beginning of 1801, an increase of more than $7 million over what it had been a decade earlier.\(^5\) To restore the nation’s finances to an even keel, Jefferson placed Albert Gallatin at the helm of the Treasury Department, a post he would hold for the next dozen years. Gallatin was eminently qualified for the job. He not only possessed the fiscal acumen to handle the complex administrative functions of the Treasury but he was also the one Republican whose abhorrence of the debt equaled if not surpassed Jefferson’s. To both men, the debt
was a “moral canker,” enriching the idle, impoverishing the industrious, and polluting the purity of the American experiment in republican government. Thus, they wanted to purge the nation of its corrupt influence once and for all. In Jefferson’s estimation, elimination of the debt would also light the way to a brighter future by freeing up millions of dollars in federal revenue that normally went towards interest payments, leaving the government with a large surplus that could be applied to projects that would benefit the nation as a whole. But neither end would be achieved unless the administration practiced the most rigid economy. All other concerns—including the exigencies of national defense—would have to take a backseat to the fundamental objective of placing the debt on the road to permanent extinction.

The need for fiscal austerity was made all the more imperative because of the way in which Jefferson intended to reduce the debt. Normally, when a government wanted to lighten its load of obligations, it did so by increasing taxes. This was the method employed by the state legislatures in the 1780s and the colonial assemblies during the French and Indian War. Jefferson, however, was determined to do the opposite—pay off the debt while simultaneously eliminating taxes. The direct tax of 1798 was a one-time affair, but the internal duties on whiskey and a few other goods and services remained in force and could be counted on to generate about $650,000 annually. Jefferson had always despised the excise and he now proposed to dispense with this form of taxation altogether, relying instead on revenue from the impost coupled with stringent limits on federal spending to bring down the debt. Gallatin was equally adamant about ending the excise before the government became too dependent on that source of revenue. “[I]f this Administration shall not reduce taxes, they never will be permanently reduced,” he wrote.
the president in November 1801. “To strike at the root of the evil and avert the danger of increasing taxes, encroaching government, temptations to offensive wars, &c., nothing can be more effectual than a repeal of all internal taxes.”

Before the year was over, Gallatin had devised a fiscal program that would accomplish all that the two men desired. Anticipating that receipts from customs duties and land sales would hold steady at between $9-10 million, Gallatin calculated that it would be possible to allocate $7.3 million a year towards the interest and the principal on the debt. At this rate of repayment, the entire debt would be redeemed after sixteen years, provided that war or some other unforeseen event did not intervene. Putting his program into practice, however, would leave the Treasury with at most only $2.7 million to cover non-debt-related expenditures. Since the army and navy together constituted the government’s biggest category of expense--appropriations for the armed forces reached a record-high of $6 million in 1800, consuming close to 60% of the federal budget--both services became the obvious targets for Gallatin’s cost-cutting. Stoddert in his parting report had hoped that Congress would allocate $1.3 million annually to support the navy. That sum would be sufficient to keep six frigates in service, finish the six 74s and the yards, and lay in a stock of timber for an additional frigate and ship-of-the-line each year. Gallatin had a very different figure in mind. In the rough financial sketch he prepared after taking over the Treasury, he suggested paring naval expenditures all the way down to $320,000 per annum. He judged this amount to be adequate assuming Congress agreed to suspend work on 74s, dispose of some of the yards, and reduce the number of frigates on active duty from six to two. By November, Gallatin had worked out the details of the budget more thoroughly and concluded that the navy could be allowed as
much as $670,000 for the coming year. While higher than his original estimate, this figure was still a far cry from the level of funding Stoddert had envisioned.\textsuperscript{13}

That the incoming administration planned to slice the navy’s operating expenses down to the bone surprised no one. The real question surrounding the service through the first half of 1801 was who would run it. All of the slots in Jefferson’s cabinet save for the navy portfolio were filled by mid-March. As expected, Jefferson gave the Treasury Department to Gallatin and the crucial post of Secretary of State to Madison. To superintend the War Department, he picked Henry Dearborn, a Revolutionary War veteran and Major General in the Massachusetts militia. The New Hampshire-born Dearborn appealed to Jefferson not only on the strength of his solid military record but because he brought sectional balance to the cabinet. The president hoped that Dearborn’s appointment along with the selection of another New Englander, Levi Lincoln, as Attorney General would help woo moderate Federalists in the region to the Republican side.\textsuperscript{14} For the Navy Department, however, Jefferson was left grasping for a candidate who possessed both a knowledge of naval affairs and good Republican credentials.\textsuperscript{15} As Jefferson lamented to his first choice for the office, New York lawyer Robert Livingston, “Republicanism is so rare in those parts which possess nautical skill, that I cannot find it allied there to the other qualifications.”\textsuperscript{16}

Livingston declined the offer, as did Jefferson’s next choice, Samuel Smith. The Maryland statesman had a resume that resembled Stoddert’s and he probably would have made an excellent secretary. However, his ambitions lay in a different direction and he had no desire to surrender his seat in Congress for a cabinet post that might well devolve into a position of marginal importance. Smith did relent and agree to fill the post in an
unofficial capacity until a suitable candidate could be found. After collecting two additional rejections, Jefferson’s search finally came to an end in July when he prevailed upon Samuel’s younger sibling, Robert, to accept the appointment. Robert Smith lacked his brother’s national prominence and he possessed no particular understanding of naval or shipping matters. Yet, Smith was not a complete unknown or without professional accomplishments. Educated at Princeton, he was well-established in Maryland state politics and over the years had built up a thriving practice as an Admiralty lawyer. In all likelihood, Jefferson saw the appointment as a way of cementing political ties to both members of the Smith clan. Jefferson probably also hoped that adding the blood relation of one of the country’s more successful merchant shipowners to his cabinet would appease the Federalists while also satisfying the commercial elements within his own party. Jefferson brushed aside any concerns about his new secretary’s relative inexperience, no doubt counting on the elder Smith to provide advice and counsel as needed. At the very least, the president ventured somewhat wishfully to Samuel, growing up in a mercantile household must have made Robert “so familiarized with naval things, that he would be perfectly competent to select proper agents and to judge of their conduct.” Samuel Smith was not quite so certain. “I wish my Brother may be equal to the Duties of the Navy Department,” he worried to Madison.

Despite his older brother’s misgivings, Robert Smith proved up to the challenge. He handled the difficult assignment of running a department that was often regarded with some public disfavor in a manner that won the admiration of the navy’s own officers and clerical staff. Perhaps the clearest mark of his effectiveness as an administrator was the length of his tenure in office. He occupied the secretary’s office through the entire, eight-
year course of Jefferson’s presidency. Only two other navy secretaries in the 19th century served as long.22 Like Stoddert before him, Smith was responsible for supervising every facet of the service’s day-to-day operations, from the purchase of provisions and stores to the recruitment of personnel to the deployment of ships at sea. In one important respect, though, his authority was much more circumscribed than his predecessor’s. During Adams administration, Stoddert had more or less presumed that his appointment gave him complete control over all questions relating to the short- and long-term development of the navy. He determined what measures should be recommended to Congress, he drafted the messages, and he worked with the legislature to see that his proposals were enacted. Adams expected to be consulted somewhere in the process, but on several occasions--most notably the acquisition of the navy yards--Stoddert declined to do even this and instead informed the president of his decisions after the fact.

Smith, however, played a much more limited role when it came to the formulation of naval policy. Between 1801 and 1808, all of the major initiatives affecting the navy originated from the president’s chair. Of course, Jefferson leaned heavily on Smith and always sought his input. Smith also acted as the executive branch’s conduit to Congress on naval matters, communicating the administration’s recommendations to legislative leaders and responding in turn to their requests for information or guidance. Nonetheless, Jefferson himself remained the principal wellspring of and ultimate authority on naval policy during his two terms as president. Smith’s main function was to serve as an advisor rather than an initiator of policy.23 His influence within the cabinet was further curtailed by Gallatin, who quickly gained Jefferson’s trust and joined Madison in the president’s inner circle of confidantes. As keeper of the nation’s finances, Gallatin felt
that he had every right to intervene in the affairs of other departments whenever the requisitioning of money from the Treasury was involved. Since just about all naval business included some sort of financial component, Gallatin never hesitated to interject his opinions into any cabinet discussions about the service. Smith tolerated the interference, but the two secretaries soon found themselves at odds on a number of issues, leaving Jefferson in the awkward position of having to referee their disagreements.

Two tasks occupied most of Smith’s attention during the first few years of Jefferson’s presidency. The first of these was implementing the plan of naval retrenchment and reform that had been laid out by Gallatin with the encouragement and approval of Jefferson in 1801. Minimizing expenditures was obviously the top priority, but Gallatin also wanted to overhaul the department’s accounting practices to eliminate the abuses he believed had been rife during the Federalist era. The second task that fell to Smith was prosecuting the naval war against Tripoli in the Mediterranean. Smith was not altogether successful in accomplishing either endeavor, but his struggles did not reflect a lack of administrative ability on his part. Rather, the problem was that the two tasks were incompatible in character. The costs of the campaign in the Mediterranean prevented Smith from keeping expenses to an acceptable level and also frustrated his efforts to apply Gallatin’s reforms. At the same time, the conflict with Tripoli dragged on for years in large part because the emphasis on economy led the administration to try to wage war on the cheap.

* * *

By the time Robert Smith joined the cabinet in the summer of 1801, most of the work of demobilizing the navy after the Quasi-War had already been completed by his
brother and acting secretary, Samuel Smith. In accordance with the provisions of the Peace Establishment Act, fifteen of the navy’s smaller ships were sold for a little over $275,000. Their disposal left the department with thirteen frigates on its rolls plus the schooner *Enterprize*. Smith elected to preserve the latter from the auction block because he figured the schooner’s nimble sailing qualities would make her a useful addition to the squadron preparing for the Mediterranean.\(^\text{24}\) The elder Smith also handled the unpleasant chore of trimming the officer corps to its prescribed limit of 9 captains, 36 lieutenants, and 150 midshipmen. Here, too, however, he exercised a little executive discretion and retained the services of several more captains than permitted by law.\(^\text{25}\) The Marine Corps likewise came under the cutting knife, its strength reduced on Jefferson’s orders to some 430 officers and enlisted men.\(^\text{26}\) Finally, before the year was out, cuts were made in the department’s complement of civilian personnel. At Portsmouth, New York, Philadelphia, and Norfolk, the constructors, storekeepers, and clerks employed in the navy yards received their walking papers, leaving the care of each site to a single civilian superintendent and his assistant.\(^\text{27}\)

While implementing the terms of the Peace Act proceeded smoothly enough, the department’s efforts to adhere to Gallatin’s plan of strict economy did not. In the memorandum Gallatin sent to Jefferson just before Congress convened in November 1801, the Treasury Secretary had set the navy’s budget at $670,000. The estimate that Robert Smith submitted to Congress for the coming year, however, amounted to $1.1 million. The reason for the big discrepancy was that Smith’s total included one major expense that Gallatin had not counted on—an appropriation of $405,000 to continue procuring materials for the 74s and improving the yards.\(^\text{28}\) Although Stoddert was no
longer running the navy, the building program he had launched had acquired a momentum that was difficult to halt. As of October 1801, the department had already spent over $450,000 on the ships-of-the-line and another $240,000 on the yards. Yet Stoddert had contracted for much more in the way of timber, plank, ordnance, and other articles. Some of these orders were in the process of being filled while others were scheduled to fall due in 1802. Robert Smith, when he took office, understood that the construction of the 74s was likely to be postponed for the foreseeable future, but he wanted at the very least to finish collecting materials for the big ships. He was also anxious to ensure that the yards were provided with the proper storage facilities to house the tons of equipment being delivered.

Jefferson gave his tacit approval to Smith’s arrangements. In his first annual address, the president called on Congress to appropriate an annual sum for the purchase of “those articles which may be kept without waste or consumption” for future use. But in the same message he acknowledged that the budgets for both branches of the armed forces would have to be trimmed if Congress accepted his recommendation to abolish the internal taxes. At a meeting in January 1802, Jefferson and his cabinet agreed to revise the navy budget downwards to $900,000. Not surprisingly, most of the savings came at the expense of the 74s and yards, which had their combined appropriations cut by $165,000. Smith accepted the changes, but not without some reluctance. When the naval appropriations bill came before Congress, he warned leaders in both chambers that the amounts allocated for the yards and repairs fell dangerously short of the navy’s real needs.
For the remainder of Jefferson’s first term and into his second, disputes over naval funding became an almost perennial event within the cabinet. Initially, Gallatin was willing to permit spending to remain at the $900,000 ceiling established in 1802. But by the fall of 1803, he was pressing for a further reduction in the department’s budget to offset some of the expenses arising from the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory from France earlier in the year. Servicing the interest on the $15 million purchase meant that the Treasury would have to pay out an extra $800,000 for the year 1804 over and above its usual expenditures. Other revenue sources totaling $500,000 would take care of part of the bill, but not all of it. And since neither Jefferson nor Gallatin would consider securing the remaining $300,000 through taxes or diminishing the rate of debt repayment, this left only one alternative: other appropriations would have to be cut by an equivalent amount. For the navy, Gallatin insisted on scaling back expenditures to $600,000 for the coming year. Once again, Smith complied with the Treasury chief’s demands for greater economy, although it took a personal appeal from Jefferson to convince him to do so. Nonetheless, despite Smith’s best efforts, the actual expenses of his department in 1804 were nearly double the amount appropriated to it. Spending on the navy rose even higher the following years, topping the $1.5 million mark in 1805 and remaining well above that level for the duration of Jefferson’s presidency.

The Navy Department’s inability to stay within its budget and hold expenses to an acceptable level was a source of constant frustration to Gallatin, who was not shy about venting his displeasure to Jefferson. The root of the problem, he was inclined to believe, lay squarely with Smith’s slipshod management and spendthrift ways. In May 1805, he finally threw up his hands in despair: "[I]t must be concluded either that the War
is better organized than the Navy Department, or that naval business cannot be conducted on reasonable terms. Whatever the cause may be, I dare predict that whilst that state of things continues we will have no navy, nor shall progress towards having one. As a citizen of the United States, it is an event that I will not deprecate.”

Although Gallatin’s dissatisfaction with the department was shared by many others within the Republican Party, there was little foundation to his criticisms. Preparing an accurate estimate of expenses for the navy was a difficult task under the best of circumstances, since accidents at sea, unanticipated repairs, and sudden emergencies or crises requiring large outlays of money could hardly be predicted ahead of time. The war with Tripoli, however, compounded the problem by greatly multiplying the uncertainties. The budget drafted by Smith and his clerks each winter was always based on the administration’s very conservative evaluation of the naval force that would be employed for the coming year in the Mediterranean. New developments, however, often rendered their calculations obsolete before the calendar year had expired. The most glaring example occurred in 1804. Smith based his estimate for the year on the assumption that only two frigates and five smaller vessels would see service against Tripoli. Yet, after the cabinet learned that the frigate *Philadelphia* had run aground and been captured in late 1803, Jefferson rushed four more frigates across the Atlantic to reinforce the squadron already there. By the time the war was brought to a close in 1805, the four-vessel squadron initially dispatched in 1801 had grown into a small armada of frigates, brigs, schooners, and gunboats. As the American naval commitment expanded far beyond the scope originally envisioned, the attendant costs of the war spiraled upwards as well.
Another reason expenditures were so heavy was that the routine upkeep and maintenance of the fleet turned out to be a very expensive proposition. Although the navy itself was still in its infancy, its ships were beginning to show their age. The wear and tear of constant cruising took their toll on some. For instance, two years of service in the Caribbean followed by three more in the Mediterranean left the *Enterprize* in need of a complete overhaul when brought into Trieste for repair in 1804. The final bill came to $33,000, which was double the schooner’s original building cost. Even the live oak frigates were not impervious to the effects of wind, sun, and salt water. Between 1802 and 1806, the *Constitution* underwent at least three extensive refits costing a little over $200,000 in all. During the same time period the *Constellation* and *Adams* each received about $55,000 worth of work. An exact reckoning of the repair bill for the entire fleet cannot be determined due to the fact that money for repairs came out of a contingency fund. Nonetheless, a rough estimate based on the department’s less than precise system of accounting and Congressional appropriation bills would put the total at around $150,000 to $200,000 per annum during Jefferson’s presidency.

Appalled by the sums the navy paid out to keep its vessels in serviceable condition, Gallatin remarked to Jefferson in 1807, "It would be an economical measure for every naval nation to burn their navy at the end of a war, and to build a new one when again at war, if it was not that time was necessary to build ships of war."

Gallatin’s prescription was hardly a practical one, but he did find a way to relieve the strain on the Treasury caused by the Tripolitan War. In early 1804, Gallatin presented Congress with a plan to increase the impost on imported goods already subject to ad valorem duties for the duration of the conflict with Tripoli. The revenue
generated from the extra duties was to go into a special Treasury account called the Mediterranean Fund, so-named because its primary purpose was to support the costs of naval operations against the Barbary States. Although technically a tax, the Mediterranean Fund was, in Gallatin’s eyes, still the least objectionable form of taxation since it would affect only those people who chose to purchase the imported goods. Furthermore, as most imports were luxury items anyway, the individuals who would have to foot the bill for the extra duties were likely to be among the nation’s more affluent class of citizens. Congress was easily persuaded and passed the law with a minimal amount of fuss. Thanks to the expansion of American overseas trade in general, the Mediterranean Fund exceeded Gallatin’s expectations. It brought in close to $600,000 during the second half of 1804 and more than a million dollars annually thereafter. The fund proved to be such a boon to the Treasury that Congress elected to keep the higher duties in effect through the end of 1808.

Jefferson came up with his own solution to the second problem, the deteriorating condition of the navy’s warships. Sometime in late 1802, Jefferson conceived of the idea of building a special dry dock at Washington to house the vessels that were currently out of commission. The term dry dock, as commonly used at the time, referred to a watertight basin that could accommodate one or two ships for the purposes of repairing their lower hulls and bottoms. Dry docks were standard fare at European navy yards. The Royal Navy, for instance, had a total of twenty-two docks distributed among its six yards. As secretary, Stoddert had appreciated the value of this kind of facility, and he had secured funding from Congress for two such docks. However, no work had been
completed on the docks when he left office and so the money appropriated was returned to the Treasury.

Jefferson’s dry dock was an altogether more ambitious project. The president proposed creating a giant, covered arsenal where all of the navy’s warships could be laid up out of the water, safe from the elements, and “in a perfect state of preservation” until they were needed again. To turn his plan into reality, Jefferson enlisted the services of Benjamin Latrobe, a recent émigré from England and an experienced architect and engineer. Latrobe’s design did full justice to the grandiose character of Jefferson’s vision. His report called for the construction of vast, three-acre enclosure capable of holding up to twelve frigates. To ensure that the structure was durable as well as fireproof, the walls were to be built of solid masonry and the arched roof covered with sheet iron. Ships would enter the dock by way of a pair of locks. Once the vessels were inside and comfortably settled on their supporting frames, the entire basin could be drained completely of water. When necessary to refloat the ships, the dock could be refilled in a matter of days, using a three-mile long canal along with a supporting system of dams, weirs, and reservoirs to bring a sufficient quantity of water from the nearby Tiber Creek. Latrobe estimated that the entire undertaking—arsenal, locks, and canal—could be completed in two years’ time at a cost of around $420,000.

Despite Latrobe’s encouraging report and his own great enthusiasm for the project, Jefferson’s plan for a dry dock failed to impress Congress or the public at large. Federalists inside and outside of Congress took delight in ridiculing the proposal and mocking Jefferson for his ignorance of naval affairs. The response from the president’s own party was far more respectful, of course, but Republicans, too, questioned the
practicality of the scheme. They were even more deterred by the expense, as they saw little wisdom in laying out close to a half million dollars to preserve a navy that was already costing the government far too much money as it was. Naval men also disagreed on the relative merits of the idea. Joshua Humphreys, the Philadelphia shipbuilder who had designed the original frigates, privately warned a Federalist Congressman that removing the ships from water for a lengthy period of time would cause their planks to shrink, opening up seams in their hulls. Lacking solid support from either political party, the dry dock proposal never even made it to bill form but instead was allowed to expire quietly in a House committee.

Jefferson was understandably disappointed by the outcome, but it was probably just as well that his idea was still-born. Even assuming that the complicated arrangement of locks, canal, and reservoirs would have worked as planned, the time and money needed to construct the dry dock would have certainly exceeded Latrobe’s estimates, perhaps by a factor of three or more. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the first two dry docks actually built by the navy in the 1830s cost on average $800,000 apiece and took seven years to complete. Furthermore, both of these facilities were the single-slip, open-air basins of the sort found at Britain’s royal yards, and not the multi-acre, covered arsenal that Latrobe and Jefferson intended to erect. If the navy’s post-war experience with dry docks can be taken as a reliable guide, it seems likely that Latrobe’s much larger and more elaborate design would have required at least a comparable if not greater investment of time and money.

While the dry dock went unfunded, so, too, did the repairs urgently required by some of the navy’s frigates. In the Cabinet, Smith faced pressure from Gallatin to reduce
the amounts of money the department budgeted for repairs.\footnote{57} The Navy Secretary usually held his ground in these tests of wills, as repairs were the one item in his estimates on which he was loath to compromise. Nonetheless, during Jefferson’s first term, although the sums allocated by Congress were substantial, they were barely enough to meet the needs of the ships on active service. Meanwhile, the frigates consigned to ordinary at the Washington Navy Yard deteriorated badly, wasting away right under the nose of Congress and the administration. In November 1804, Federalist Senator William Plumer commented in his journal on the sad spectacle these vessels presented: “Paid a visit to the Navy Yard—was surprised to find out how fast our little navy is rotting in the mud of the Potomac.”\footnote{58}

That same fall, Jefferson and Gallatin finally recognized that the plight of the ships in ordinary could be ignored no longer. With their blessing, Smith earmarked $200,000 in the navy’s 1805 budget for the repair of the vessels laid up at the Washington yard.\footnote{59} He asked for a comparable sum the following year.\footnote{60} Congress was cooperative on both occasions, and the money appropriated allowed the department to restore two of the heavy frigates, the \textit{United States} and \textit{Chesapeake}, that had been languishing in ordinary the longest. The funds were also used to refit several of the frigates that had recently returned from the Mediterranean. But the appropriations from Congress came too late to save the \textit{General Greene}, \textit{Boston}, and \textit{New York}, three of the frigates that had been built during the Quasi-War. The \textit{General Greene} had been written off in 1804 as being in such poor shape as to be suitable for conversion into a storeship or sheer hulk only.\footnote{61} Surveys conducted in 1806 revealed that the \textit{Boston} and \textit{New York} had also fallen into a state of serious disrepair.\footnote{62} The demise of the lightly-gunned
General Greene was no great misfortune, but the deterioration of the Boston and New York deprived the navy of the services of two of its more powerful and well-designed warships. Their loss coupled with the destruction of the Philadelphia in Tripoli Harbor left the department with only nine frigates to its name when Jefferson reached the end of his second term. By this time, Gallatin’s program of fiscal austerity had enabled the administration to trim some $26 million from the national debt. But the Treasury Secretary’s policy had taken its toll, costing the navy a significant proportion of its blue water fighting strength.

* * *

Strict economy in government spending represented only one part of Gallatin’s plan for financial retrenchment. He also hoped to save money by making the cabinet officers more accountable for the funds they did receive. As a Congressman during the 1790s, he had battled repeatedly but with little success against the Federalists to enforce strict compliance with the terms of the appropriation acts. Although by the middle of the decade, itemized appropriations had become the norm, the department secretaries did not, as a rule, feel bound to limit spending to the exact amount allocated to each budget heading. Instead, they tended to treat the appropriations as more of a general fund to be applied as needed among the different categories of expenditure. Gallatin and other Republicans deplored this practice, arguing that it gave the executive branch license to flout the Constitution and spend the public’s money in any manner it desired.

When Gallatin took over the Treasury in 1801, fiscal reform ranked high on his list of priorities. As he explained to Jefferson, “The great characteristic, the flagrant vice, of the late administration has been total disregard of laws, and application of public
moneys by the Departments to objects for which they were not appropriated.” Accordingly, he recommended making a host of changes to the appropriations process in order to curtail the discretionary authority of the department chiefs. As in most matters relating to public finance, Jefferson was of a like mind, and he included all of Gallatin’s suggestions in his first address to Congress. 66

Gallatin and Jefferson were also united in their desire to expose the financial transgressions of the Federalists, not only for the sake of punishing their political opponents but also to ensure that similar abuses did not occur again. With their encouragement, shortly after the 7th Congress convened in December 1801, Republicans in the House appointed a committee chaired by the cousin of Gallatin’s wife, Joseph H. Nicholson of Maryland, to investigate the spending practices of the previous administration. A staunch Jeffersonian, Nicholson enjoyed a close relationship with his cousin-in-law, and he was more than happy to let Gallatin direct the investigation from the Treasury Office. Gallatin provided Nicholson with a list of questions he wanted the committee to consider and then, at the committee’s request, prepared a detailed memorandum answering those very same questions. He also assisted with the drafting of the committee’s own report, which Nicholson delivered to Congress in the spring of 1802. 67 The committee concentrated most of its attention on the Navy and War Departments, as these two offices were believed to have been the worst offenders. Not surprisingly, Stoddert’s purchase of the six navy yards came under close scrutiny and, at one point, the former secretary was called in to supply written testimony. 68 In the end, the committee acknowledged that the purchase of two of the yards could be justified under the 1799 act permitting construction of two dry docks, but that still meant that the
other four had been acquired without authorization from Congress. The committee’s overall conclusions were even more damning: “Upon the whole, the Committee are of opinion, that considerable sums of public money have been greatly misappropriated, and that much expense has been incurred without any legal authority.”

Congress stopped short of passing a general law governing appropriations as Gallatin had wanted, but the legislature did adopt the most important of his recommendations. Beginning in 1802, Congress altered the language of the appropriation acts to make their provisions binding in character. Working within the cabinet, Gallatin also secured Robert Smith’s agreement to change the way the Navy Department handled the funds it received. Smith instructed all naval agents to itemize their requisitions so that their expenditures could be charged to the appropriate category of appropriations. He promised to do the same himself when applying to the Treasury Department for drafts of money. The agents were also required to file monthly returns detailing how they had spent the money entrusted to their care. The purpose of these reforms was to ensure that the department applied its appropriations to the objects specified by Congress while also making certain that the sums expended did not exceed the amounts designated by law.

Smith implemented all of the changes demanded by Gallatin. Nonetheless, the two secretaries continued to clash over matters of naval finance. Contingent expenses were a particularly sensitive point with the Treasury chief. When Smith included a request for $40,000 for general contingencies in the navy’s 1803 budget, Gallatin erupted in anger: “What those $40,000 dollars, therefore, are for, I am totally at a loss to know,” he complained to Jefferson. “Indeed, I cannot discover any approach towards reform in
that department (the navy). Yet, the real problem was that while scrupulous adherence to the appropriation acts might be laudable in principle, Smith found it almost impossible to apply in practice for the reason outlined earlier. The Navy Department simply could not calculate its expenses for the upcoming year with absolute precision, especially when fighting a difficult and unpredictable war against an enemy some four thousand miles distant from American shores. In Smith’s defense, it should be noted that this problem of keeping expenditures in line with appropriations was in no way unique to his administration. On the contrary, it was a chronic one that would plague the service throughout the first half of the 1800s.

Gallatin, however, showed little sympathy for Smith’s difficulties. Indeed, at times, he seemed to go out of his way to make trouble for his cabinet colleague. The most egregious incident took place in 1805, near the conclusion of the Tripolitan War. Following the loss of the Philadelphia, Congress had appropriated an extra $1 million in March 1804 to cover the costs of reinforcing the squadron in the Mediterranean and continuing operations against Tripoli through the end of December. The complicating factor was that bills for approximately $350,000 of expenses incurred during 1804 did not actually fall due until 1805. When Smith attempted to settle the bills using the funds allocated the previous year, Gallatin refused on the grounds that the appropriation had expired at the end of 1804. Although almost half of the original $1 million remained unexpended, the Treasury Secretary’s interpretation of the law left Smith with no choice but to take the money out of the 1805 appropriations. This only added to the navy’s fiscal woes because the department was already facing a budget shortfall of about $250,000 due to a number of unplanned expenses during the present year. By January
1806, the service was in such dire financial straits that Smith was forced to appeal to Congress for an immediate appropriation to prevent the department from defaulting on some of its bills. Gallatin’s actions wound up causing Smith much embarrassment and anxiety while serving no useful purpose since Congress eventually had to make good the deficits anyway.

Questions concerning naval appropriations and spending not only led to conflict within the cabinet but also created friction between Smith and Republican leaders in Congress. Gallatin’s influence undoubtedly played a part, as the Treasury Secretary maintained close ties with a number of powerful Republicans who shared his fiscal goals. Gallatin’s circle of intimates included his cousin-in-law Nicholson, Speaker of the House Nathaniel Macon, and John Randolph, who chaired the House Ways and Means Committee. All were good friends and corresponded frequently with one another. In addition, when Congress was in session, the three legislators often stopped in at Gallatin’s house on Capitol Hill after hours to sit and talk politics.

Of the three, Randolph had the most contact with Smith because the Ways and Means Committee was responsible for drafting the appropriations bills and overseeing government expenditures. Randolph was one of the self-styled Old Republicans, a band of planter-statesmen and ideological purists from the South who insisted on rigid allegiance to the ideas of states’ rights, strict constructionism, and agrarian values. Although over the course of his long Congressional career, Randolph gained a well-deserved notoriety for his eccentric mannerisms and mercurial temperament, he never wavered in his devotion to the Old Republican creed. He was also steadfast in his dedication to the principles of economy and accountability that were at the heart of
Gallatin’s program. Like Gallatin, Randolph had no patience for the Navy Department’s money problems, and he soon came to regard Smith with barely concealed contempt. “I [should not] be surprised to see the Navy Department abolished or, in more appropriate phrase, swept by the board, at the next session of Congress,” he wrote Gallatin in the summer of 1805. “The nation has had the most conclusive proof that a head is no necessary appendage to the establishment.” A few years later, in a letter to Nicholson, he derided the secretary for his ineptitude as an administrator: “I called, some time since, at the Navy office, to ask an explanation of certain items of the estimate for this year. . . . I propounded a question to the head of the Department--he turned to the Clerk, like a boy who cannot say his lesson, and with imploring countenance beseeches aid. . . . There was not one single question, relating to the department, that the Secretary could answer.”  

Randolph refrained from attacking Smith personally in Congress, but he did not hide his disgust at the navy’s spending habits. When a delegate in the House balked at the $411,000 Smith sought in 1806 for repairs and contingencies, Randolph declared that he was as ignorant as the next person as to what the contingencies part of the appropriations was wanted for. Still, it was pointless to protest, he argued, because “whether they provided the money or not, it would be spent and an additional appropriation be made the next session.”

Randolph’s complaints notwithstanding, the reforms introduced by Gallatin produced some positive changes in the navy’s administrative practices. The new system requiring agents to submit itemized requisitions and monthly returns improved the department’s ability to keep tabs on expenditures and account for how its appropriations were being applied. As for Smith, he sometimes chafed at the constraints placed on his
discretionary powers. Nonetheless, he appears to have made a sincere effort to abide by the spending limits specified in the appropriation acts, at least to the extent this was possible without compromising the navy’s ability to carry out its designated assignments. As it turned out, three times during his first four full years in office, the navy ran a deficit. Yet, on each occasion, the deficiency resulted from the department’s need to respond to some new event or development on the naval or diplomatic front. Furthermore, when exceeding his budget, Smith never proceeded without first consulting Jefferson and securing the president’s approval for the additional outlays of money.

Gallatin, Randolph, and their associates, however, were not inclined to be understanding. The report of Nicholson’s investigation committee confirmed what critics of the service had suspected all along, while the repeated controversies over appropriations convinced them that the department was either incapable of or unwilling to mend its ways. As a rule, Congress still gave Smith what he wanted in terms of annual and supplemental appropriations, but the scorn with which Gallatin and friends viewed him effectively poisoned his relations with the legislature. The beleaguered secretary had his share of supporters, most notably his own brother Samuel who frequently acted as Robert’s advocate on naval issues. But the elder Smith vacated the House for a seat in the Senate in 1803, leaving the leadership positions in the lower chamber to men like Randolph and Macon who were opposed to the navy on principle. Their hostility towards the navy in general and Smith in particular helped to reinforce the existing Republican prejudices against the service that were a carryover from the partisan battles of the 1790s. The generally unfriendly disposition of the Republican majority in Congress would come to play an important role after 1804 when some party members
began to reevaluate the nation’s naval policy and considered reviving part of the
Federalist defense system.

* * *

Administering his department in a manner that satisfied Gallatin and avoided
antagonizing Randolph would have been difficult even in the most tranquil of times. But
the times were far from tranquil when Smith took charge of the Navy Department in July
of 1801. The Senate had barely ratified the convention bringing an end to the Quasi-War
with France before the United States found itself involved in another maritime conflict,
on this occasion against the North African regency of Tripoli. After buying peace with
Algiers back in 1795, the Federalists had negotiated similar settlements with Morocco,
Tunis, and Tripoli. However, the Barbary problem did not disappear with the signing of
these treaties. The Barbary rulers, according to their diplomatic customs, still expected
periodic payment of additional gifts and gratuities as the price of their continued
friendship. Adams’ administration managed to make an inherently unstable situation
worse by being slow to uphold its end of the original agreements. In the case of Tripoli,
the U.S. failed to deliver the naval stores promised to the pasha, Yusuf Qaramanli.
Eventually, almost two years after the treaty had been approved by the Senate, an
American consul arrived in Tripoli and prevailed upon the pasha to accept a cash gift in
lieu of the absent stores. Although placated for the moment, the Tripolitan leader was
still incensed by what he perceived as the preferential treatment given to Tunis and
Algiers and the more generous terms of their treaties. By early 1801, the dilatory
behavior and dismissive attitude of the American government had exhausted his patience, and he threatened war unless he received $225,000 in cash and $20,000 in annual tribute.\textsuperscript{78}

The American consul in Tripoli kept Adams fully informed of the pasha’s growing belligerency as well as the increase in the size of his navy. Preoccupied with the Quasi-War and the escalating political crisis at home, however, the administration devoted only fitful attention to its troubles with Tripoli. At one point, during the winter of 1799-1800, administration officials considered dispatching a couple of frigates to the Mediterranean in the spring. But Stoddert cancelled the cruise when French attacks on American shipping in the Caribbean intensified in the first part of 1800. Besides being unwilling to spare the services of the two frigates, Stoddert also believed that it was too risky to send American warships into the Mediterranean while hostilities with France continued.\textsuperscript{79} Jefferson, on the other hand, was not encumbered by the same concerns that restricted Adams’ freedom of action. His inauguration in March 1801 found the country at peace with France and the navy idle. That same month, Stoddert, in one of his final acts as secretary, and Samuel Smith agreed on plans to prepare a naval squadron for the Mediterranean. Jefferson delayed launching the operation until he could consult with his cabinet. The meeting took place on May 15, at which time the president’s advisors expressed their unanimous support of the proposed expedition.\textsuperscript{80} Two weeks later, the frigates \textit{President}, \textit{Philadelphia}, and \textit{Essex} and the schooner \textit{Enterprize} under the overall command of Commodore Richard Dale left Norfolk, bound for the coast of North Africa.

In choosing resistance rather than submission, Jefferson at last had the opportunity to implement the plan of action he had argued for so forcefully but
unsuccessfully during the 1780s and early 1790s. But Jefferson’s decision to use force against Tripoli in 1801 did not mark a complete return to his previous position. To begin with, his goals were much more limited than they had been a decade or more earlier. In the 1780s, he had objected to paying a dollar of tribute to any of the Barbary rulers. In his view, instead of purchasing peace, the country should wage relentless war against the Barbary regencies in order to end their predatory practices once and for all. As president, however, at no time did Jefferson consider trying to overturn the tribute system. His main objective was to convince the pasha of Tripoli as well as the other Barbary leaders to honor their existing agreements with the United States. In return, Jefferson was willing to continue payment of whatever annuities or other emoluments the United States had promised to provide. Thus, at the same meeting in which Jefferson and his cabinet resolved to dispatch a naval squadron to the Mediterranean, they also agreed to supply the dey of Algiers with the three years of annual tribute that had fallen into arrears. Jefferson was also prepared to sweeten arrangements with the Barbary leaders as necessary to keep them content. For instance, Dale, the commander of the first squadron, carried a cash gift of $10,000 that he was to give to the pasha of Tripoli as a token of American friendship, assuming the latter had not already broken his treaty with the United States. A year later, when the emperor of Morocco grew restive, the administration agreed to present him with 100 naval gun carriages and up to $20,000 in cash as a reward for staying out of the conflict with Tripoli. For the duration of the Tripolitan War, Jefferson’s overriding concern was to hold the line in the Mediterranean and discourage the Barbary leaders from escalating their demands over and above what the American government had already agreed to pay. But as the preceding examples
demonstrate, even on this last point Jefferson showed a certain willingness to bend his principles.

By 1801, Jefferson had also lost something of his former enthusiasm for seeking a naval solution to the Barbary problem. The letters he had written on the subject while overseas in the 1780s had blazed with anger, indignation, and, above all, the conviction that war was preferable to a peace obtained through bribery. Armed resistance would not only be cheaper in the long run, he had averred, but more just and honorable, too. After becoming president, Jefferson still found the idea of paying tribute to be distasteful, and he was just as anxious as ever to assert American honor. Yet, his martial ardor was tempered by his ambivalence about the costs of fighting the Barbary corsairs. The dispatches sent out under the signature of Secretary of State James Madison to American diplomats in May 1801 went to some pains to rationalize the administration’s policy, as if Jefferson and his cabinet officers were trying to convince themselves that they were acting prudently. Since the government was already required by law to keep several frigates in service, the dispatches noted, ordering a squadron to cruise in the Mediterranean would “add but inconsiderably to the expense that would otherwise be incurred.” Privately, Jefferson also downplayed the squadron’s expense, assuring a correspondent that most of the costs would be covered by the proceeds from the warships due to be sold under the provisions of the 1801 Peace Act.

The administration’s initial uncertainty increased once the American naval deployment in the Mediterranean showed no signs of bringing the conflict with Tripoli to a speedy conclusion. Gallatin was the first to question the logic behind the decision to fight. “I consider it no greater disgrace to pay [Tripoli] than Algiers,” he wrote Jefferson.
in August 1802. In his opinion, it was “a mere matter of calculation whether the purchase of peace is not cheaper than the expense of war.”88 Jefferson kept his own doubts at bay a little longer. In early 1802, he was prepared to offer the pasha peace “on easiest terms,” but he refused to consider any settlement that entailed payment of a cash gift or any sort of annuity to the Tripolitan ruler.89 By March of 1803, however, Jefferson’s resolve had also crumbled. To Robert Smith he admitted, “I have never believed in any effect from a show of force to [the Barbary] powers. Their system is a war of little expense to them, which must put the great nations to a greater expense than the presents which would buy it off.” The most that war could accomplish was “to keep the demand of presents within bounds.”90 The following month, Madison authorized the American minister to Tripoli to offer the pasha $20,000 outright with another $8-10,000 to follow on a yearly basis in exchange for peace. Similar terms were to be offered to the bey of Tunis.91 In fairness to Jefferson, the American proposal paled in comparison to the huge sums of money that European governments were accustomed to doling out to the Barbary powers.92 Nonetheless, the administration’s new negotiating attitude still represented a significant retreat from the no-peace-for-money stance that had formed the basis of Jefferson’s Barbary policy since the 1780s.

Jefferson capitulated on the issue of paying for peace for the simple reason that neither he nor Gallatin had any stomach for waging a protracted naval war. And protracted was exactly what the Tripolitan conflict turned out to be. It lasted until the spring of 1805 or four full years in all before an acceptable settlement with the pasha was reached. Several factors contributed to the lengthy and often indecisive character of the contest. Logistics was one. The navy was attempting to fight a war in a region that was
more than 3000 miles from its home bases. The administration was fortunate that Britain and other European nations permitted use of their ports and naval yards throughout the Mediterranean. Yet, this assistance only eased the navy’s logistical difficulties—it did not solve them entirely. Most of what the navy needed in terms of food and stores still had to be procured in the United States and transported across the Atlantic in chartered storeships that were dispatched at three-to-four month intervals. In addition, the navy’s operational flexibility was hobbled by its reliance on Gibraltar as its main base of supply during the first two years of the conflict. Although equipped with an excellent facilities, Gibraltar suffered from a serious drawback for American purposes: it was over 1,000 miles distant from Tripoli. As one navy captain complained, depositing the squadron’s stores at Gibraltar “is little better than having them in America, so very precarious, & uncertain are our passages up and down the Mediterranean.” At Robert Smith’s suggestion, Edward Preble, the commander of the third American Squadron, shifted his base to a more central location in late 1803. Preble settled on Syracuse on the eastern side of Sicily. Part of the territory ruled by King Ferdinand IV of Naples, Syracuse was ideally situated to support operations against Tripoli. Preble also managed to find local sources of supply for some clothing and foodstuffs, thus relieving or at least reducing his dependence on shipments of these items from the United States. He further improved his supply situation by striking up a relationship with a pair of well-connected English merchants at Syracuse and neighboring Malta and arranging for their appointment as navy agents. By the middle of 1804, thanks to Preble’s initiative and Smith’s labors back in Washington, the United States had created a logistical infrastructure capable of sustaining a sizable naval force in the central Mediterranean. But the important point to
remember is that it took several years to get that infrastructure in place and functioning efficiently.

Geography and climate together formed a second factor that hampered the American naval effort against Tripoli. From western Tunis to Egypt, the sea bottom slopes gently away from the shore, producing broad belts of shallows studded with rocks, reefs, and sandbars. The shoal-strewn waters along this stretch of the North African coastline posed a hazard to any sailing ship of the era, but the big American frigates were at a particular disadvantage because of their deep draft. Although ordered to impose a tight blockade of the port of Tripoli, the frigates were helpless to prevent light vessels hugging the coast from entering or leaving the harbor practically at will. Any captain who ventured too close to shore risked disaster, as William Bainbridge discovered to his mortification when his frigate Philadelphia ran aground a few miles off Tripoli while pursuing an enemy sail in the fall of 1803. The first two American commodores, Dale and Richard V. Morris, had only a single shallow-draft warship, the schooner Enterprize, at their disposal, and both officers impressed upon Smith the need for more small cruisers if they were to have any hopes of shutting down Tripoli’s coasting trade. The administration heeded their pleas. In early 1803, Congress approved Smith’s request to purchase or build up to four vessels mounting sixteen guns or less. The following year Smith secured permission to acquire another two light ships and as many gunboats as he wanted. The adoption of these measures took care of the problem, but the solution had not exactly been swift in coming. By the time the first of the new vessels reached the Mediterranean in the fall of 1803, the war with Tripoli was already into its third year.
Moreover, even with the addition of several brigs and schooners, the American naval force in the Mediterranean could do nothing to overcome the constraints on its movements imposed by the weather. From October through March, strong winds and frequent gales lashed the Mediterranean, which made for hazardous sailing conditions throughout the region. The danger was especially acute for ships in the southern Mediterranean because the prevailing wind direction was from the north. Any vessel caught by a northerly storm near the North African coast would find itself in the situation that mariners dreaded most, trapped in treacherous waters on a lee shore that offered very few safe havens. The onset of winter did not bring American naval activity to a complete standstill. Elements of the Mediterranean squadron remained busy with various tasks, such as convoying friendly merchantmen or visiting the ports of the other Barbary powers on diplomatic errands. Sometimes one or two ships were also assigned to patrol duty, with orders to cruise off Tripoli whenever the weather permitted. Only once, however, did the navy attempt to carry out a winter campaign and that expedition, led by Commodore Richard V. Morris in early 1803, was foiled by a fierce gale that forced the squadron to abandon its mission before it had even sighted the Tripolitan coast. Otherwise, even at its most intense, the naval war against Tripoli was conducted on a seasonal basis, which enabled the pasha to enjoy a lengthy respite from the rigors of conflict each year.

The third factor working against the United States was the uneven quality of its naval leadership. The dozen or so captains who retained their commissions in 1801 had all seen action in the Quasi-War, so they were experienced officers. But that is the best that could be said of several of them. The two at the top of the seniority ladder, John
Barry and Samuel Nicholson, were both past their prime and no longer fit for active duty at sea. Early on in the struggle with Tripoli, the officer corps also suffered a serious blow when it lost the services of two of its most talented officers, Thomas Truxtun and Silas Talbot. Truxtun’s combat record against France had confirmed his reputation as an outstanding sea officer, and he was the administration’s first choice to command the Mediterranean squadron. However, unhappy with the terms of the appointment, he twice declined the position and quit the navy altogether in the spring of 1802. Despite being first or second in line to command one of the scheduled relief squadrons, Talbot for reasons of his own turned in his resignation a few months before Truxtun.

The departure of the two men left a gaping hole in the front ranks of the officer corps that was only imperfectly filled by the captains behind them. Richard Dale, who took Truxtun’s place as commodore of the first U.S. squadron, was competent, but he showed little imagination or resourcefulness in handling the small force at his disposal. His successor, Richard Morris, was an outright disaster. During the Quasi-War, Morris’s habits of declining to file reports and making frequent returns to port had angered Stoddert, and the captain had not even been included on Samuel Smith’s preliminary list of officers to be retained. Yet, the prestige of his family name helped save him. Entrusted with command of the second Mediterranean squadron, Morris proceeded to show that his lackluster performance in the previous war was no fluke. His lengthy sojourns in port and his failure to press the blockade against Tripoli led to his recall in mid-1803 and subsequent dismissal from the service. With the arrival of his replacement, Edward Preble, command of the Mediterranean squadron at last passed into the hands of an energetic and aggressive captain. Through the spring and summer of
1804, Preble used his light vessels to keep up a sustained blockade of Tripoli for really the first time during the war. With the assistance of several borrowed gunboats and bomb ketches, Preble also launched a series of assaults on the forts, batteries, and small vessels protecting the harbor. However, Preble’s tenure as commodore ended abruptly in September 1804 when reinforcements arrived under the command of a more senior captain, Samuel Barron. As a squadron leader, Barron turned out to be as ineffective as Morris, but for a different reason: his health collapsed due to a serious liver ailment and he wound up spending most of his tour of duty in the Mediterranean bedridden in port. On the whole, then, only one of the four captains who served in a command capacity for an appreciable length of time during the Tripolitan War showed any real ability, ingenuity, or combative spirit. The other three ranged in quality from the ordinary to the incompetent to the infirm.

The fourth and final factor that frustrated American efforts to resolve the Tripolitan conflict was the administration’s own policy of naval parsimony. In hindsight, this factor probably had the most pronounced effect in prolonging the war; ironically, it was also the one factor that Jefferson could most fully control. The administration conducted the entire war with one and sometimes both eyes on the bottom line. Determined to prevent the conflict from interfering with his economic program, Gallatin repeatedly pressed Jefferson to keep a tight limit on naval spending, even if this meant reducing the money available for operations in the Mediterranean. Smith, for his part, pushed to strengthen the Mediterranean squadron, especially once it became apparent to him that only a powerful force would compel the pasha to yield and hold the pretensions of the other Barbary rulers in check. Jefferson himself leaned strongly towards Gallatin’s
position, and he sometimes passed on the treasury chief’s recommendations as his own. But he also tried to steer a course that satisfied both secretaries, which led to a pattern of decision making that had an erratic, almost schizophrenic quality. On more than one occasion, reinforcements were dispatched, only to be followed a short time later by instructions ordering the recall of several ships. The overall result, though, was much closer to Gallatin’s liking than Smith’s. For most of the war, the navy employed only a small proportion of its fighting strength in the Mediterranean. Only in the final stages of the conflict did Jefferson consent to make an all-out effort to overcome the pasha.

From the start, Jefferson and his advisors wanted to keep the naval force deployed in the Mediterranean down to a small size. While the 1801 Peace Act called for six frigates to remain in constant service, Acting Navy Secretary Samuel Smith interpreted this provision loosely. Smith arranged for three frigates and the schooner Enterprize to be sent out initially, with a second squadron of three frigates to follow in relief of the first after nine months. In this fashion, six frigates would be kept in commission, but only three would usually be at sea at one particular time. Smith’s decision not to dispatch a larger force is understandable, since he lacked current intelligence about the situation in the Mediterranean. In October 1800, Yusuf had issued an ultimatum giving the United States six months to meet his demands before he would initiate hostilities. But that was the only thing the administration knew for certain as Dales’ squadron prepared to get underway in May 1801. The most recent report to reach the government from James Cathcart, the American consul in Tropili, dated back to early January 1801. Therefore, administration officials could only speculate as to whether the pasha had followed through on his threat. The orders drafted for Dale reflected the administration’s
uncertainty. His instructions covered every possible contingency, from peace with all of the Barbary states to war with one or more of them.\textsuperscript{112}

Once Dales’ “squadron of observation,” as his force was designated, arrived at Gibraltar at the beginning of July, however, he quickly learned that Yusuf had not been bluffing. Six weeks earlier, Tripoli had formally declared war on the United States. Soon after his arrival, Dale also realized that his small command was inadequate to its designated tasks. In his very first dispatch to Washington, he observed that “there is full Employment at present in the Mediterranean, for all the Frigates belonging to the United States.”\textsuperscript{113} His primary mission was to blockade the port of Tripoli but his orders also directed him to deliver letters and tribute to Tunis and Algiers, provide convoys to friendly merchantmen, and otherwise do what was necessary “to protect our commerce and chastise [the pasha for his] insolence.”\textsuperscript{114} Expected to carry out all of these duties across an expanse of coastline more than 2000 miles long, Dale had little choice but to disperse his squadron. By a stroke of good fortune, he had found the pasha’s two strongest cruisers, the 28-gun Meshouda and a 16-gun brig, riding at anchor in Gibraltar when his squadron reached the port in July. Dale left the Philadelphia behind to watch the Tripolitan ships and prevent them from escaping out to sea.\textsuperscript{115} These two ships aside, the rest of Tripoli’s seagoing navy consisted of five vessels of various rigs, all of which were poorly armed and manned and posed little direct danger to Dale’s warships.\textsuperscript{116} But the risk to American shipping in the Mediterranean was another matter. As the Quasi-War had shown, merchantmen were vulnerable to just about any craft that could float and carry a few cannons. Moreover, there was every reason to believe that the pasha would attempt to augment his naval force by purchasing and equipping additional raiders.
To provide some security to American traders in the area, Dale after he had fulfilled his diplomatic obligations at Algiers and Tunis detached the *Essex* with orders to escort friendly merchantmen into and out of the western Mediterranean. Having taken this precaution, the commodore then proceeded on to Tripoli, with his command reduced to the *President* and the *Enterprize*. If the administration had been hoping to impress the Tripolitan ruler with a formidable display of naval power, a single frigate accompanied by a schooner were unlikely to have the desired effect. Dale lingered in the vicinity of Tripoli for eight weeks, keeping up a half-hearted blockade and engaging in a fruitless exchange of messages with pasha. By the end of September, though, his growing sick list and dwindling stock of provisions forced him to beat a hasty retreat to Gibraltar.  

Dale’s return to Gibraltar brought the curtain down on the first act of the war against Tripoli. The initial round of operations had produced some positive results. While sailing near Malta in August, the *Enterprize* staged a convincing demonstration of the navy’s fighting capabilities, shooting to pieces a Tripolitan cruiser of comparable size without losing a single man in the process. More importantly, the mere presence of an American naval force in the Mediterranean had avoided a repeat of 1793, when Algerine corsairs, taking advantage of the newly concluded truce with Portugal, had snatched up eleven U.S. merchantmen. The loss of even a few vessels in 1801 would have dealt a serious blow to American commercial prospects in the Mediterranean, panicking merchants, depressing trade, and sending insurance rates shooting skywards. In addition, if several dozen American sailors had been taken captive, the pasha would have gained a powerful bargaining chip, enabling him to add payment of a hefty ransom to his other demands. Thanks to the timely arrival of Dale’s squadron, however, Tripoli had not
seized a single American ship or mariner. Instead, the pasha had seen his two strongest
to U.S. shipping, the first phase of the naval war against Tripoli had been very
vessels bottled up in port and a third wrecked in battle. So in terms of neutralizing the
successful. But Dale had made no discernible progress in accomplishing the
administration’s primary objective of settling the conflict. Safe behind the thick stone
walls of the fortifications guarding Tripoli harbor and willing to put up with the
temporary inconvenience of Dale’s porous blockade, Yusuf Quaramanli refused to
moderate his demands or abide by the treaty he had agreed to in 1796.

Dale recognized that forceful prosecution of the war demanded a larger naval
force and he repeatedly said so in his communications with the Navy Department. In his
estimation, Tripoli could not be effectively blockaded with fewer than two frigates and
two sloops, while a serious assault on the harbor would require even more frigates. This
force was in addition to whatever ships were needed to convoy American trade and keep
watch over the other Barbary states. Richard O’Brien, the ranking American diplomat in
North Africa, chimed in with similar advice in his letters to Secretary of State

The administration, however, had other priorities. In late 1801, at about the
same time that Dale was reminding Robert Smith of “the necessity of sending a strong
force “ to the Mediterranean the following spring, Gallatin was seeking to slash the
navy’s 1802 appropriations to $670,000, its lowest level of funding since 1797, to offset
an anticipated decline in government revenues. In the fall of 1801, the administration
did allow the frigate Boston, which had been assigned the task of delivering the new
American minister to France, to join Dale’s squadron. But the reinforcement was only
temporary, as shortly afterwards Smith ordered Dale to send home two frigates over the
winter. And when the president and his department chiefs gathered in January 1802 to discuss their Mediterranean policy for the year ahead, one of their main concerns was cutting naval spending so that Jefferson could proceed with the program of tax and debt reduction he had just presented to Congress. The meeting ended with the cabinet resolving to send out only the frigates *Constellation* and *Chesapeake* and the schooner *Enterprize* in the replacement squadron, with a third frigate, *Adams*, to be held in reserve. Although the administration subsequently relented and allowed the *Adams* to sail as well, it made no move to expand the American naval presence in the Mediterranean beyond the level of force employed in 1801, as both Dale and O’Brien had recommended. This remained true even after Congress in early February approved a new law empowering Jefferson to mobilize any part of the fleet he wanted for service in the Mediterranean. Given carte blanche to intensify the naval war against Tripoli, Jefferson elected instead to maintain the status quo.

If the orders given to Dale had been difficult to carry out with the force at his disposal, those prepared for his successor, Richard Morris, were equally problematic and for precisely the same reason. On the one hand, his instructions stressed the importance of intimidating the pasha by appearing off Tripoli with his entire squadron and establishing a close blockade of the harbor if negotiations failed. On the other, he was urged not to neglect the western Mediterranean, where an increasingly restless Morocco, the big Tripolitan cruiser *Meshouda* tied up at Gibraltar, and the numerous requests for escorts by anxious American merchant captains all demanded some degree of attention. The problem for Morris, of course, was that, unless he could find some way for his ships to be in two places at once, he could not act on one part of his orders without
compromising his ability to carry out the other. Smith glossed over the contradictions by advising the commodore “to exercise his soundest discretion” as to the exact disposition of his squadron.\textsuperscript{125} Morris took Smith at his word and used plenty of discretion, although not in the manner the navy secretary intended. Arriving at Gibralter in late May 1802, Morris spent the remainder of the year either dallying in port, usually in the company of his pregnant wife who had been allowed to join him on the expedition, or escorting the occasional merchant convoy. But he kept his distance from Tripoli.

While Morris dawdled, the appearance of executive harmony dissolved. Up through the middle of 1802, the administration had managed to put up a united front on the conduct of the war. If any disagreements occurred, they were settled in private conversations that left no trace in the documentary record.\textsuperscript{126} But from August 1802 onwards, Smith took an increasingly assertive role within the cabinet and argued for a more aggressive approach to the Barbary problem. His stance brought him into direct conflict with Gallatin. The trouble started when word reached Washington in August that Morocco had declared war and that a break with Tunis might also be imminent. In response, Smith proposed readying the frigates \textit{New York} and \textit{John Adams} for sea as soon as possible.\textsuperscript{127} Jefferson approved this measure after conferring with the other secretaries.\textsuperscript{128} A few weeks later, the administration learned that both reports had been premature: the Moroccan emperor had rescinded his declaration, granting the United States a six-month reprieve to meet his demands, while the news about Tunis turned out to be of questionable accuracy. Seeing an opportunity to strengthen the Mediterranean squadron, Smith pressed to have the two frigates sail anyway. Only a formidable force could hold the other Barbary regencies in check and bring the conflict with Tripoli to a
close, he reminded Jefferson. But “with a less force the war may continue for years, which would be playing a hazardous game.” Gallatin took a different view. Already inclined to regard the Tripolitan war as a waste of national resources, he was willing to tolerate the departure of New York, but was dead set against dispatching the John Adams, too. At first, Jefferson sided with Gallatin and countermanded the sailing orders for John Adams, but he reconsidered once Smith pointed out that provisions for the ship had already been purchased and the crew paid two month’s wages in advance. In the end, the argument of financial expediency rather than strategic necessity carried the day and the frigate was allowed to sail. Yet, the decision to add the John Adams and New York to Commodore Morris’s force represented at most a temporary departure from policy. Jefferson assured Gallatin that if the other Barbary states besides Tripoli were still inclined for peace, then all of the frigates except two would be recalled before winter. The two men also agreed that the navy’s budget should be targeted for further cuts in 1803, provided the situation in the Mediterranean remained stable. True to Jefferson’s word, the cabinet in October 1802 determined that the Chesapeake and Constellation should leave the Mediterranean immediately, as should the Adams if the threat of hostilities with Morocco had passed.

By the spring of 1803, the country was no closer to ending the war with Tripoli than it had been the previous spring. Far from winding down, the conflict was in danger of expanding to include Tunis and Morocco. Nonetheless, in Washington, fiscal economy continued to be the determining factor in the administration’s Barbary policy. Early in the new year, just as Congress was preparing to discuss the question of naval appropriations for 1803, Smith had to fend off an 11th-hour effort by Gallatin to reduce
funding for the Mediterranean squadron by 40%. Smith stood his ground and the budget was submitted to Congress without modification. But the Secretary of the Navy fared less well in March with his own request to send out one of the big 44-gun frigates to take the place of the warships returning home. The Constellation had just arrived at the Washington Navy Yard, and the Chesapeake and possibly the Adams were due back at any time, too, which would leave Morris with as few as two frigates and a schooner in the Mediterranean to renew the contest with Tripoli. Jefferson, however, saw no reason to depart from the arrangement worked out in the cabinet. Although the administration had been bombarded with letters over the past ten months from the American consuls in the Mediterranean pleading for more ships, neither their appeals nor Smith’s entreaties made an impression on the president. “[N]o new fact justifies a change of plan,” he wrote to Madison, explaining his decision not to authorize the additional frigate. If the naval campaign of the past year had been disappointing, the fault lay entirely with Morris’s passive strategy. “Our misfortune has been that our vessels have been employed in particular convoys, instead of a close blockade equivalent to universal convoy.” That some of the navy’s commanders and other interested parties might see things differently he had no doubt, but Jefferson discounted their views: “Every officer in the navy, and every merchant in the U.S. would be for [sending out reinforcements]: because they see but one object, themselves.”

The Mediterranean squadron was not completely debilitated by all of these departures, as Morris in an uncharacteristic display of initiative elected to hold on to the Adams. But for the third consecutive year, during the good-weather sailing months of March through September, the American naval presence in the region amounted to only
three frigates and the ever-present schooner *Enterprize*. Morris actually made aggressive use of this force for a change, rendezvousing with all four ships off Tripoli at the end of May, 1803 and maintaining at least the semblance of a blockade for the next four weeks. The arrival of his squadron marked the first time in the war that Tripoli had been visited by more than a single American frigate. The U.S. warships engaged in a couple of minor actions with Tripolitan gunboats and shore batteries and also demolished an enemy cruiser of about 22 guns that was caught at anchor outside the harbor. But as had been the case with Dale’s two ships in 1801, Morris’s squadron ran low on provisions and was forced to return to Gibraltar for replenishment. Not long afterwards, Morris was suspended from command and ordered home.

The force sent out under Edward Preble to replace Morris’s ships at summer’s end included four new vessels—the 16-gun brigs *Syren* and *Argus*, the 12-gun schooner *Vixen*, and the 14-gun schooner *Nautilus*. The need for more light, swift-sailing ships capable of operating in the shallow waters off the North African coast had been apparent to just about everyone since the first year of the war. In January 1803, the administration sought funding for the ships and Congress allocated the money a month later. Preble’s command was also the largest yet deployed in the Mediterranean. Overall, seven ships were entrusted to his charge: the two brigs and two schooners named above, the ubiquitous *Enterprize*, and the heavy frigates *Constitution* and *Philadelphia*. Although Preble’s force was equipped with fewer frigates than previous squadrons, its much greater ability to work close inshore and interdict Tripoli’s own small cruisers and trading vessels compensated for the absence of some of the heavier-gunned warships.
Jefferson was hopeful that the addition of more ships of the *Enterprize*’s design would finally enable the navy to establish a tight blockade of Tripoli and make the pasha feel the sting of war. Yet, in what by the end of 1803 had become a familiar pattern, the administration still allowed fiscal concerns to take precedence over the conduct of the naval war. Preble’s squadron had barely finished assembling in the Mediterranean in early fall when Smith again came under pressure from the president to scale back the American naval presence in the region. The budget Smith had submitted to Gallatin in October 1803 estimated the navy’s total expenses for 1804 at $770,000, a figure that was already substantially lower than the budgets of the past five years. But that amount was not low enough to suit Gallatin. The secretary informed Jefferson that the Treasury was facing a deficiency of $300,000 as a result of the interest due on the government stock used to purchase the Louisiana Territory from France. Jefferson feared that asking Congress to raise the money through new taxes might stir up opposition to the treaty, jeopardizing its ratification by the Senate. Thus, he was determined to redress the shortfall not by increasing revenues but by diminishing expenditures. Gallatin proposed keeping only a single frigate and two or three of the smaller vessels in the Mediterranean in 1804 as one cost-cutting measure. Jefferson concurred and he wrote Smith directly, suggesting that $75,000 could be saved if part of Preble’s force was withdrawn over the winter. Once more, Smith resisted. Although willing to go along with Jefferson’s other request to limit the sum spent on repairs, he opposed cutting corners at the expense of the Mediterranean squadron. Exactly what Smith said in response to the president is unknown but the outcome of their discussion is clear enough. The revised budget Smith
turned over to Gallatin eliminated $120,000 worth of expenses in his department, but the funding for all seven ships in Preble’s squadron remained intact.\(^{140}\)

If the reduction favored by Gallatin and endorsed by Jefferson had been put into effect, the offensive capabilities of Preble’s squadron would have been seriously diminished, leaving the commodore in much the same predicament as his predecessors, stuck with a force that was too feeble to perform its mission.\(^{141}\) Smith’s refusal to go along with the idea spared Preble that frustration, but circumstances conspired to deprive the commodore of one of his frigates anyway. In late October 1803, while awaiting the arrival of the rest of the squadron at Tripoli, the *Philadelphia* ran aground on an unmarked shoal in the harbor. The frigate and her entire crew of 307 officers and sailors were seized by the Tripolitans.\(^{142}\) The loss of the *Philadelphia* was a disaster of the first magnitude. It weakened Preble’s command while vastly strengthening the pasha’s own position, since he now held in his hands several hundred American hostages whose release the U.S. government would be anxious to secure as soon as possible. There was also the possibility that the humiliating setback might embolden some of the other Barbary leaders to make war on the United States. Finally, Jefferson was concerned about how the news of the frigate’s capture would affect American relations with the European powers. The administration was currently engaged in delicate negotiations with both Britain and Spain, and Jefferson worried that European respect for America would plummet as a result of the *Philadelphia* fiasco.\(^{143}\)

The desire to avenge the *Philadelphia* and restore the country’s battered prestige at last galvanized the administration into taking decisive action. Within weeks of learning about the disaster in March 1804, Jefferson and Smith had resolved to send out a
squadron of four frigates under the command of Captain Samuel Barron. To underwrite the expanded naval effort, Gallatin worked out a plan with his friends in Congress to raise the duties on select imports and apply the extra revenue to a special account designated the Mediterranean fund. As part of the bill creating the Mediterranean fund, Congress also issued an emergency appropriation of $1 million to cover all of the navy’s additional expenses through the end of the year. The law also authorized Smith to acquire two more small ships and hire any number of gunboats for service in the Mediterranean. All together, the steps taken by the government in the wake of the Philadelphia’s capture signaled a major change in a policy that had been, up to this point, distinguished mostly by foot-dragging and half-measures. For three years, Jefferson had sought to get by with “the smallest force competent” to do the job, to borrow a phrase from the president’s 2nd annual message to Congress in December 1802. After the loss of the Philadelphia, though, the administration finally agreed to assemble a naval squadron in the Mediterranean that was powerful enough to punish Tripoli and give the rest of Barbary reason to reconsider its attitude towards the United States.

Due to some unexpected delays, Barron’s squadron did not reach the central Mediterranean until early September 1804. By that time, Preble had already accomplished a great deal with his own force despite being short one frigate. In February, he had carried out a daring raid on Tripoli harbor that destroyed the Philadelphia at her moorings right under the guns of the pasha’s castle. Once the weather moderated, Preble maintained a steady blockade of the port through the spring and the summer. He also went on the offensive, using his ships plus six gunboats and
two bomb ketches on loan from Naples to batter the city and its defenses. The Americans mounted five separate attacks, capturing three enemy gunboats in the first assault and inflicting sufficient damage on several other occasions to rattle the pasha and the city’s residents. Barron arrived at Tripoli too late in the season to participate in Preble’s campaign, but before ending operations for the year, the two commodores set in motion plans to strike at Yusuf through his deposed brother Hamet, who was hiding in Egypt awaiting an opportunity to recover his throne. William Eaton, the former American consul at Tunis, had been advocating such a venture since the beginning of the war, and he finally secured the administration’s backing in the spring of 1804. Eaton spent the first two months of 1805 plotting with Hamet and helping him recruit a band of about 400 followers and hired soldiers. In March 1805, with Eaton at his side and three of the light ships from Barron’s squadron providing supplies and naval support, Hamet’s small army stormed Derna, Tripoli’s second largest city.

The fall of Derna coupled with the impending renewal of American naval operations against Tripoli were enough for Yusuf Pasha. Preble’s bombardment of the city was still fresh in his memory and he knew that he would be assailed by a far more formidable flotilla over the summer. Commodore John Rodgers, who had taken over the squadron due to Barron’s continued poor health, now had under his command five frigates and an equal number of brigs and schooners. Moreover, his squadron was about to be reinforced by a substantial number of additional ships. Four gunboats and two light vessels had been purchased in Italy while another eight gunboats, two bomb ketches, and the frigate John Adams were en route from America. The Tripolitan ruler, however, never gave Rodgers the opportunity to send his armada into action. Threatened with
attack by sea and by land, the pasha capitulated in June 1805 and agreed to make peace on terms that were acceptable to the United States. Initially, following the capture of the Philadelphia, Yusuf had insisted on receiving $3 million in ransom for the prisoners along with some amount of annual tribute as the price of his friendship. By the first quarter of 1805, he had dropped his demands considerably, and in the final treaty he accepted only $60,000 for his captives. Equally important, the treaty contained no provisions for payment of a yearly annuity, although he was promised a gift of a few thousand dollars when the new American consul took up residence in the capital, as was the custom in Barbary diplomacy. Shortly after negotiations with Tripoli had been concluded, Rodgers sailed on with most of his squadron to Tunis. The ruler of Tunis, Hammuda Bey, had been threatening war if the United States did not return one of his cruisers and two prize ships that had been caught attempting to run past the blockade into Tripoli. For some time, he had also been demanding a 36-gun frigate as a present. The sight of the massed American fleet anchored in the bay of Tunis had the desired effect. In a concession unprecedented in the annals of Barbary, the bey offered to send an emissary to Washington to settle the differences between the two countries. He also renounced his desire for a frigate or any form of tribute and assured Rodgers that his intentions towards the United States were entirely friendly. With this agreement in hand, the navy had completed its mission in the Mediterranean. Amiable relations with Tripoli and Tunis had been restored. In addition, thanks to a timely visit by Preble back in the autumn of 1803, Morocco had pledged to uphold its treaty while Algiers had remained generally quiescent throughout. The United States thus found itself at peace with all of the Barbary potentates. In October 1805, Smith wrote Rodgers ordering him to
return home with bulk of the fleet, leaving behind only a token force of three ships to ensure that the North African states remained on good behavior. The dispatch of this letter signaled that the administration considered active campaigning in the Mediterranean to be at a close.

If the conflict with France was Mr. Stoddert’s War, as one historian labeled it, and if the later struggle with Britain would be dubbed Mr. Madison’s War by contemporaries, then the contest with Tripoli should be remembered as Mr. Jefferson’s War. Jefferson made the initial decision to commit the American navy to the Mediterranean when Congress was out of session. From that point onwards, Jefferson directed the war from the executive branch with minimal involvement by Congress. The president only called in Congress when he needed legislative approval of measures that had already been decided within the executive council. Congress, for its part, readily assented to all of Jefferson’s requests and appeared only too happy to leave the conduct of the war entirely in the executive’s hands. Within the cabinet, decision-making was a collaborative process. Jefferson solicited the opinions of his department chiefs on most if not all key diplomatic and naval issues and often acted on their advice. Smith and Gallatin, in particular, played important roles in shaping the administration’s policy in the Mediterranean. But while the counsel of his cabinet officers was influential, the final word in these discussions belonged to Jefferson alone.

In the end, the Tripolitan War turned out to be very similar to the Quasi-War. Both conflicts entailed the application of American naval power against a foe with limited naval resources of its own. And while the Tripolitan War was lengthier, less tidy, and more frustrating than the Quasi-War for American leaders, it proved to be every bit
as successful. Even during the first few indecisive years, the presence of the navy protected American commercial interests in the region and helped neutralize a potentially explosive situation with the other Barbary Powers. Over the course of the entire war, Tripolitan cruisers seized only a single American merchant vessel. And as a further measure of U.S. success, insurance rates for U.S. vessels remained around 5%, a telling sign of mercantile confidence in the safety of the Mediterranean shipping routes. Eventually, a strong display of force settled the war with Tripoli in precisely the way Jefferson hoped it would. The only difference was that the amount of force was greater than anticipated and it had taken several years and the loss of the Philadelphia before Jefferson mustered the resolve to dispatch a powerful fleet. Still, Jefferson had accomplished all of his objectives. Although the treaty came under attack by administration critics and historians have questioned the decision to pay ransom, Jefferson had every reason to be pleased with the agreement. The United States avoided paying tribute to Tripoli, which had always been the main focus of Jefferson’s Barbary diplomacy. Moreover, he had also managed to convince Tunis and Morocco to reaffirm their treaties with the United States, again without committing to the payment of a yearly annuity. Pressuring the pasha to turn over his prisoners without receiving any ransom in return was a risky policy and might have led to the death of some of the prisoners or the breakdown of negotiations. A particularly punitive treaty might have also led to an unstable peace, resulting, perhaps, in the renewal of Tripolitan aggressions against the United States at the first available opportunity. Finally, there was no guarantee that another round of naval operations against Tripoli would have brought the pasha to his knees.
While some of the administration’s enemies were critical of the treaty, none of this criticism extended to the conduct of the navy itself. Instead, the navy was showered with praise for its actions in the Mediterranean. During the Quasi-War, Republicans had taken little pride in the navy’s accomplishments. Republican writers either mocked the navy’s feats or condemned its officers for participating in the Federalists’ aggressive campaign against a former ally, France. During the Tripolitan War, however, the public took great delight in all of the navy’s exploits. The navy was celebrated in songs, poems, plays, and public toasts. Andrew Sterrit who commanded the Enterprize in the first defeat of a Tripolitan cruiser and Stephen Decatur who led the daring raid on the Philadelphia were treated as national heroes. Edward Preble also became the toast of the nation upon his return from the Mediterranean. Federalists often tried to claim some of the credit, arguing that the navy that had performed such glorious deeds was the creation of their own party. But Republicans paid no attention to their rival’s claims. The vindication of American honor had been Jefferson’s doing, not Adams’, and so they felt fully entitled to celebrate the navy’s triumphs as their own.

The warmth with which the service was embraced, though, failed to produce a fundamental change in Republican attitudes about the dangers of naval expansion. Nor did the happy outcome of the Tripolitan War prompt Republicans to reevaluate their own position on the navy. Celebrating the tiny American navy for standing up to the petty Barbary potentates was one thing—endorsing the Federalist proposition that an enlarged navy would be useful in a war against one of the European naval powers was another. Republicans were grateful for the navy’s services and saw the results of the campaign in the Mediterranean as a triumph of American spirit and resolve. But they were not moved
to abandon their own opposition to the Federalist naval initiatives of the 1790s. The navy had proved useful against a particular kind of foe in the Mediterranean. But its value ended there, and as American relations with Britain, France, and Spain soured after 1803, Republicans were no more inclined to look to the navy for security than they had been when Jefferson started his first term as president.


*A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, James D. Richardson, ed. (Washington, 1910), 1:311.


This figure is based on the average proceeds from excise taxation between the years 1797 and 1800. See the chart in Dewey, *Financial History*, 112.


15 The most detailed account of Jefferson’s search for a navy secretary can be found in Henrich, “Triumph of Ideology,” 195178-99. See also Charles O. Paullin, Paullin's History of Naval Administration: A Collection of Articles from the U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings (Annapolis, 1968), 120-22.


17 Smith was hoping to secure an appointment as a foreign minister. See Frank A. Cassell, Merchant Congressman in the Young Republic: Samuel Smith of Maryland, 1752-1839 (Madison, 1971), 105-08.

18 Unlike his brother, Robert Smith has never been the subject of a full-scale biography. For details about his pre-1801 career, see Thom M. Armstrong, Politics, Diplomacy and Intrigue in the Early Republic: The Cabinet Career of Robert Smith, 1801-1811 (Dubuque, 1991), 2-4; Henrich, “Triumph of Ideology,” 195.


22 Paullin, Naval Administration, 122.

23 This principle of administration applied to the other department chiefs as well, with the possible exception of Gallatin. See Richard M. Johnstone, Jr., Jefferson and the Presidency: Leadership in the Young Republic (Ithaca, 1978), 85-90.

24 Samuel Smith to Jefferson, May 4, 1801, Jefferson Papers, reel 38; Robert Smith, “Statement of the sales of Public Vessels . . . ,” December 8, 1801, American State Papers, Class VI: Naval Affairs [hereafter ASP:NA], (Washington, 1834), 1:80. Smith also planned to retain the Enterprize's sister schooner, Experiment, but she was sold because the repairs needed to make her serviceable again were judged to be too expensive. See Henrich, “Triumph of Ideology,” 217. The department did hold on to the converted merchantman George Washington for a period of time. She was used to
transport naval stores owed to Algiers in 1801 and then sold upon her return from the Mediterranean the following year.

25 The exact number retained is not quite clear. Smith recommended keeping fifteen captains on the navy’s active roster. At a cabinet meeting in October, 1801, it was decided to strike six names from the list, but the order was never carried out in its entirety. As of February 1802, the official number of captains in the service stood at twelve. For an extended discussion that only partly succeeds in clarifying the confusion surrounding this subject, see Henrich, "Triumph of Ideology," 247-54.


27 Ibid., 127.

28 Gallatin to the Senate, December 21, 1801, ASP:F, 1:704. For the breakdown of Smith’s estimates, see *Letter from the Secretary of the Treasury, accompanying a report and estimates of appropriation for the service of the year 1803 . . .*, Early American Imprints, 2nd series, no. 3314.

29 Smith to Congress, December 8, 1801, ASP:NA, 1:78-80.


31 *Writings of Jefferson*, 8:119.


33 *Annals of the Congress of the United States: The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States* (Washington, 1834-56), 7th Congress, 1st Session, 1356-57. A handful of Federalists tried but failed to convince the House to reinstate Smith’s original figures for the 74s and yards and to increase the appropriation for repairs. See ibid., 1198-1203.

34 Smith to Doc Eustace [William Eustis], April 19, 1802; to Christopher Ellery, April 22, 1802, Letters to Congress.

36 State of the Finances, Gallatin to the Senate, October 25, 1803, ASP:F, 2:47-49; Gallatin to Jefferson, October 4, 1803, Writings of Gallatin, 1:161-62; Jefferson to Robert Smith, October 10, 1803, Jefferson Papers, reel 47. Even then, Smith did not make all of the adjustments in the department’s budget that Gallatin wanted.

37 For a convenient summary of the Navy Department’s annual expenditures, see the table in Dewey, Financial History, 124.


40 Letter from the Secretary of the Treasury, accompanied with a report and estimates of appropriation necessary for service of the year 1804 . . ., Early American Imprints, 2nd series, no. 5330.

41 Michael L. S. Kitzen, Tripoli and the United States at War (Jefferson, N.C., 1993), 128. A fifth frigate, the John Adams, was dispatched as a storeship with most of her guns removed. For another example of how unexpected expenses could make a mess of the navy’s budget, see Robert Smith’s letter to John Randolph, chair of the House Ways and Means Committee, explaining the causes of the $600,000 deficit in the department’s 1805 appropriations. Smith to Randolph, December 16, 1805, Letters to Congress. He wrote a similar letter to Jefferson. See Smith to Jefferson, November 11, 1805, Jefferson Papers, reel 55.

42 The navy reached its peak strength in the Mediterranean in 1804-05. By the fall of 1804, five frigates (plus the partially-armed John Adams), three brigs, and two schooners had been assembled under the command of Commodore Samuel Barron. The squadron was reinforced the following summer by eight gunboats and two bomb ketches. For the composition of the different squadrons that saw service in the Mediterranean between 1801 and 1805, see Register of Ships and Officers, 1803-1809, Record Group 45, National Archives.


44 Paul Hamilton to House of Representatives, January 6, 1812, ASP:NA, 1:252-54.

45 The navy’s accounting office did maintain records of the amounts expended on specific vessels. According to this data, the department spent about $120,000 annually on repairs. However, the problem with these records, as the chief accountant noted, is that they did not include the money that was sometimes spent to purchase timber and other materials for the general purpose of repairs. See the letter from Thomas Turner, January 3, 1812
that was appended to the report from Paul Hamilton cited in the previous note. Appropriations from Congress to the category of repairs and other contingencies from 1802 to 1808 averaged $250,000 a year. Actual expenditures on repairs would thus have fallen somewhere in the range between $120,000 and $250,000.

46 Dewey, *Financial History*, 121. Duties were raised 2.5%, with an additional 10% duty levied on imports arriving in foreign vessels.


48 Mediterranean Fund, Gallatin to the Senate, February 19, 1810, *ASP:F*, 2:404-05. In its final year of operation, receipts from the extra duties declined to under $500,000 due to the effects of the embargo.


50 Roger Morriss, *The Royal Dockyards during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars* (Bath, 1983), 44.


52 Report on Proposed Naval Dry Dock, Latrobe to Robert Smith, December 4, 1802, ibid., 1:237-48. In the report, Latrobe also suggested the possibility of relying on the Potomac River as a water source. To do this would require constructing an 8-mile long feeder canal that cut across the center of Washington and flowed through a pair of tunnels, including one that would be located directly beneath the Capitol. Latrobe preferred this plan over the Tiber Creek option, but he acknowledged that it would take a good three years to get the Potomac canal into working order.

53 Gene A. Smith, "For the Purposes of Defense": *The Politics of the Jeffersonian Gunboat Program* (Newark, 1995) 61-64.


55 Smith, “Purposes of Defense, 64. Rutledge, the recipient of the letter from Humphreys cited above, was a member of the House committee that elected to kill the plan.
In terms of their square footage, the docks constructed in the 1830s were about \( \frac{1}{4} \) the size of Latrobe’s dock. Besides being considerably smaller, they also did not depend on a lengthy canal for their water supply. See Paullin, *Naval Administration*, 183-84.

See, for instance, Gallatin to Jefferson, January 18, 1803, October 6, 1803, *Writings of Gallatin*, 1:115-18, 162.


By late 1804, the condition of the frigates in ordinary had become such a source of embarrassment to the administration that both Smith and Gallatin counseled Jefferson to strike out any reference to the subject in his annual address to Congress. In a draft copy of the message, Jefferson had included a paragraph explaining the necessity of appropriating money for the repair of these ships. The two secretaries agreed that the president’s remarks would only provide Federalist critics with additional ammunition to use in their attacks on the administration. Jefferson accepted their advice and removed the passage in question. See Gallatin to Jefferson, October 1804, *Writings of Gallatin*, 1:214-15; Smith to Jefferson, October 31, 1804 [received], Draft of Annual Message, Jefferson Papers, reel 50. For the Navy Department’s budget for the year 1805, see *Letter from the Secretary of the Treasury, transmitting a report and estimates of the appropriations which appear to be necessary for the service of the year 1805 . . .*, Early American Imprints, 2nd series, no. 7532. The $200,000 was included in a larger appropriation of $411,000 for repairs and other contingencies.

Smith sought $303,000 for repairs as part of another general appropriation of $411,000. However, he did not specify how much of the money would be applied towards the vessels out of commission. See Smith to the House of Representatives, April 11, 1806, *ASP:NA*, 1:151-52. Gallatin was somewhat less obliging this time around. While preparing his annual financial report for Congress, he informed Jefferson that he had based some of his calculations on the assumption that the Navy Department would limit its expenditures to $650,000, which was the level agreed upon back in late 1803. The estimates submitted by Smith placed the navy’s budget at over $1 million. See Gallatin to Jefferson, November 21, 1805, *Writings of Gallatin*, 1:262-63.


Robert Smith to Nathaniel Macon, January 30, 1806, ibid., 1:148; Edward Preble to Jefferson, received January 1, 1806 [misdated as 1805], Jefferson Papers, reel 51; Frederic C. Leiner, *Millions for Defense: The Subscription Warships of 1798* (Annapolis, 2000), 121. The Navy Department maintained the *New York* and sometimes the *Boston*, too, on its rolls through the beginning of the War of 1812, but no attempt was made to repair either vessel.

State of the Finances, Gallatin to the Senate, December 16, 1808, *ASP:F*, 2:307. The actual amount of the principal that had been redeemed was closer to $42 million, but the purchase of Louisiana in 1803 had added $15 million to the debt. The figure cited in the text represents the net reduction of the debt from its 1801 total.

For the Republicans’ largely futile efforts in the 1790s to establish tighter controls over Congressional appropriations, see Lucius Wilmerding, Jr., *The Spending Power: A History of the Efforts of Congress to Control Expenditures* (New Haven, 1943) 24-49.


The key change was the addition of the phrase “the following sums be, and the same hereby are respectively appropriated” to the enacting clause. See Leonard D. White, *The Jeffersonians: A Study in Administrative History, 1801-1829* (New York, 1951), 112.


For the navy’s ongoing struggles with estimates, deficits, and the appropriation laws, see Wilmerding, Jr., *Spending Power*, 63-117. The Board of Navy Commissioners put the problem most succinctly in an 1829 report on the subject: “The estimates upon which the appropriations are founded are prepared with all the care and accuracy of which the fallible judgment of man will admit. Yet, after all, they are but estimates: and until it shall be given us to foresee the events of futurity, the fluctuations in the market of the world, and the casualties of the ocean, we shall never arrive at precise accuracy in our calculations as to the expense of a navy employed in every known sea, and experiencing
the vicissitudes of every known climate.” See John Rodgers to John Branch, November 23, 1829, ASP:NA, 3:400.

74 Robert Smith to John Randolph, February 2, December 12, 1805, January 3, 13, 15, 1806; to Uriah Tracy, March 29, 1806, Letters to Congress.

75 Randolph to Gallatin, June 28, 1805; to Nicholson, February 17, 1807, quoted in Henry Adams, John Randolph (Boston, 1882), 160-61, 210-11. As Joseph Henrich observes, Randolph’s account of his meeting with Smith was almost certainly exaggerated or distorted. Like any dedicated ideologue, Randolph was not above twisting the truth to make a point.

76 Annals of Congress, 9th Congress, 1st Session, 998-99. Smith did not exactly go out of his way to ease the animosity that developed between himself and Randolph. For instance, prior to bringing the 1805 appropriations bill before Congress, Randolph in his capacity as Ways and Means Chairman had written Smith inquiring about the big sum requested for repairs and contingencies. Smith responded with a curt message saying that while the amount might seem unusually large to the committee, it was no more than sufficient. See Smith to Randolph, April 2, 1806, Letters to Congress.

77 The standard account of relations between the United States and the Barbary principalities remains Ray W. Irwin, The Diplomatic Relations of the United States with the Barbary Powers, 1776-1816 (Chapel Hill, 1931). The agreements with the four states are described on pages 61-91.


Anas of Jefferson, 213.

For Jefferson’s views during the 1780s, see the letters cited in chapter 1, note 30.

Anas of Jefferson, 213. The administration at this time also took steps to expedite the delivery of the $40,000 worth of jewels and other presents that had been promised to Tunis. See Madison to William Eaton, July 17, 1801, Papers of Madison: Secretary of State Series, 1:423. Jefferson, however, was pessimistic that fulfillment of the treaty obligations would satisfy the Barbary rulers for any length of time. See his letter to Wilson Cary Nicholas, June 11, 1801, Writings of Jefferson, 8:63.


Madison to James Simpson, April 20, 1802, October 21, 1802, Papers of Madison: Secretary of State Series, 3:141, 4:38.

Jefferson to James Monroe, February 6, 1785; to John Page, August 20, 1785; to John Adams, July 11, 1786, Jefferson Papers, 7:639, 8:419, 10:123.


Madison to William Eaton, May 20, 1801; Circular Letter to American Consuls, Mediterranean, May 21, 1801; Circular Letter to American Ministers, May 21, 1801; to Richard O’Brien, May 21, 1801, Papers of Madison: Secretary of State Series, 1:200, 209, 210, 213; Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr., May 14, 1801, "The Jefferson Papers." Massachusetts Historical Collections, 7th Series, Vol. 1 (1900): 95. Jefferson based his comments on the information he had received from Acting Navy Secretary Samuel Smith, who had recently presented him with a memorandum detailing the costs of the squadron being readied for the Mediterranean. Smith estimated that the total expense of the American naval effort would be about $480,000 a year. See Smith to Jefferson, May 4, 1801, Jefferson Papers, reel 38.

Gallatin to Jefferson, August 16, 1802, Writings of Gallatin, 1:88.

January 18, 1802, Anas of Jefferson, 217; Madison to James Leander Cathcart, April 18, 1802, Papers of Madison: Secretary of State Series, 3:135

Jefferson to Robert Smith, March 29, 1803, Jefferson Papers, reel 45.

Madison to Cathcart, April 9, 1803, Papers of Madison: Secretary of State Series, 4:494-95.
For instance, in October 1802, Sweden had ended its war with Tripoli by agreeing to pay the pasha $150,000 in addition to $8,000 in annual tribute. See Kitzen, *Tripoli and the United States* (Jefferson, 1993), 71.


This was the practice Stoddert had employed to ferry supplies to American warships in the Caribbean during the Quasi-War. See Palmer, *Stoddert’s War*, 84-87. Overall, the Navy Department sent out more than two dozen storeships to the Mediterranean between 1801 and 1807. The system worked well for the most part, but there were occasional glitches. For instance, the first provisioning ship ordered to Gibraltar, the *American Packet*, was seized by a Spanish privateer and held for several days before Commodore Dale secured her release. More common, though, were problems concerning the contents of the ships’ cargoes. Specific items were not always purchased in the quantities requested or were even missing altogether. In other instances, supplies were so poor in quality as to be worthless or they were badly damaged in transit. For general information on logistics during the Tripolitan War, see Adamiak, “Naval Logistics,” 108. For examples of the problems encountered, see Richard Dale to Robert Smith, October 26, 1801; Edward Preble to Smith, February 19, June 20, 1804, Smith to Daniel Bedinger, August 31, 1804, *Naval Documents Related to Barbary Powers*, 1:607, 3:440, 4:189, 491.


Smith to Preble, July 13, Preble to Smith, October 23, 1803, ibid., 2:476, 3:160-61.

Upon his arrival in the Mediterranean, Preble informed Smith that provisions were impossible to obtain in the region due to the renewal of war between France and Britain. But after several months of cruising in the western and central Mediterranean, he was able to report that the prospects of purchasing provisions and stores from local suppliers were much better than he had initially believed. See Preble to Smith, ibid., September 18, October 5, 1803, February 19, April 19, June 20, 1804, 3:59, 143, 440; 4:43, 190. For the appointment of agents at Syracuse and Malta, see Preble to Smith, January 17, 1804, ibid., 3:339.

Much of the background information in this and the succeeding paragraph is drawn from John Pryor’s brilliant study, *Geography, Technology, and War: Studies in the Maritime History of the Mediterranean, 649-1571* (Cambridge, 1988), 12-24. Although his book focuses on the medieval era, his general observations about how environmental
conditions shaped navigation in the Mediterranean still apply to the sailing ships of the early 19th century.


100 Pryor, Geography, Technology, and War, 16-24, 87-89. See also Fernand Braudel, The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II (New York, 1972), 1:246-253. Braudel, like Pryor, is concerned with an earlier period—in Braudel’s case, the sixteenth century—but for all of the improvements in ship design, rigging, and navigation techniques, 19th century sailing vessels were still dependent on and obliged to make allowances for the elements. For a suggestive essay on this subject, see N.A.M. Rodger, “Weather, Geography and Naval Power in the Age of Sail,” Journal of Strategic Studies 22 (June/Sept. 1999): 178-200.

101 Kitzen, Tripoli and the United States, 76.

102 As noted on page 114 above, although fixed by law at nine, the actual number of captains on the navy’s rolls exceeded the legal limit until 1803. See note 25.

103 Barry was allowed to keep his commission in recognition of his long and honored career extending back to the American Revolution. Although also a veteran of the Revolution, Nicholson was neither popular nor well-regarded, and he probably owed his place on the captain’s list to the political influence of his family. His niece was Gallatin’s wife, while he was also related by blood to the Republican Congressman Joseph Nicholson.

104 Technically, Truxtun did not resign his commission. He merely threatened to resign if Robert Smith did not fulfill his promise to appoint a captain to serve under Truxtun on his flagship in the Mediterranean. Smith chose to treat Truxtun’s note issuing his ultimatum as an actual letter of resignation. Truxtun later regretted his actions and for some years afterwards sought to have his commission restored. See Heinrich, “Triumph of Ideology,” 254-56.

105 In the words of one historian, the “first chapter of the Tripolitan War could be described as strangely passive and dull.” See Kitzen, Tripoli and the United States, 57. Nonetheless, Dale had performed well enough for Smith to offer him command of the third Mediterranean squadron in 1803. By then, however, Dale had grown disgruntled over Congress’s unwillingness to establish the rank of admiral and he resigned from the navy in a huff. See Heinrich, “Triumph of Ideology,” 257.
Morris was the son of one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, Lewis Morris, and the nephew of the prominent diplomat and New York politico, Gouverneur Morris. For Morris’s behavior in the Quasi-War, see Palmer, *Stoddert’s War*, 191. For details about his family and his inept showing as commodore of the Mediterranean squadron, see Kitzen, *Tripoli and the United States*, 60-84.


Ibid., 329-33. Despite being incapacitated by his illness, Barron refused to relinquish control of the squadron until May of 1805, when he finally turned over the reins of command to Captain John Rodgers.

Their subordinates were not always much better. Captain Daniel McNeill of the frigate *Boston*, who joined Dale’s squadron for a few months in 1801-02, acted in such an erratic fashion as to raise doubts about his sanity. Upon McNeill’s return to the United States, Smith hastily revoked his commission under the provisions of the 1801 Peace Act. See McKee, *An Honorable Profession*, 191-93. Captain Alexander Murray, who sailed in the *Constellation* as part of Morris’s squadron, also returned under a black cloud as a result of his passive conduct and placid demeanor while in the Mediterranean. One of the American consuls vented that the “government may as well send out Quaker meeting houses to float about this sea as frigates with Murrays in command.” See Kitzen, *Tripoli and the United States*, 67.

Smith to Jefferson, May 4, 1801, Jefferson Papers, reel 38. The second squadron was to remain ready to sail within a month’s notice, so Smith was not ruling out the possibility of sending reinforcements to the Mediterranean if additional ships were needed.


Dale to Samuel Smith, July 2, 1801; to Captain Samuel Barron, July 4, 1801, ibid, 1:498, 500.

James L. Cathcart, the American consul at Tripoli, had been reporting regularly on the naval strength of the pasha. See Cathcart to David Humphreys, December 14, 1799,
“Marine Force of Tripoli,” James L. Cathcart, August 14, 1800, and, for his most recent estimate, Cathcart to Thomas Appleton, June 2, 1801, Naval Documents Related to Barbary Powers, 1:340-41, 368, 484.


Andrew Sterrett to Richard Dale, August 6, 1801, Naval Documents Related to Barbary Powers, 1:537. For a secondary account of the action, see Glenn Tucker, Dawn Like Thunder: The Barbary Wars and the Birth of the American Navy (Indianapolis, 1963), 142-44.

In 1793, insurance rates on American vessels operating in the Mediterranean jumped from 3% to 25% as soon as the news of the Algerian truce with Portugal became public. By contrast, during the war with Tripoli, rates never went above 6% and actually declined over the course of the conflict to as low as 3.5%. See Robert G. Albion and Jennie B. Pope, Sea Lanes in Wartime: The American Experience, 1775-1942 (New York, 1942), 70, 131-32.

Dale to [Robert Smith], July 2, 19, August 18, November 6, 1801, Naval Documents Related to Barbary Powers, 1:498, 520-521, 553, 615; Richard O’Brien to James Madison, July 22, September 26, 1801, Papers of Madison: Secretary of State Series, 1:457, 2:138. O’Brien was an old Barbary hand and a strong advocate of employing naval power in the Mediterranean. His hard-line attitude derived, in part, from his first-hand experience of the menace posed by the Barbary corsairs. Originally a merchant captain, O’Brien had been captured and held prisoner in Algiers from 1785 to 1795. During his many years of captivity and afterwards, O’Brien often provided advice and assistance to American traders and government officers on Barbary matters. In 1798, he returned to Algiers in an official capacity as consul general. For background on O’Brien’s activities before the Tripolitan War, see Robert J. Allison, The Crescent Obscured: The United States and the Muslim World, 1776-1815 (New York, 1995), 154-180.

Dale to Smith, November 6, 1801, Naval Documents Related to Barbary Powers, 1:615; Gallatin to Jefferson, Notes on President’s Message, November, 1801, Writings of Gallatin., 1:63-65.

Smith to Dale, October 1, December 15, 1801, Naval Documents Related to Barbary Powers, 1:589, 639. The Enterprize had already been sent back in October with dispatches for Washington.

Entry for January 18, 1802, Anas of Jefferson, 217.
Titled “Act for the protection of the Commerce and Seamen of the United States, against the Tripolitan Cruisers,” the law also authorized U.S. naval commanders and privateers to take Tripolitan vessels as prizes. In addition, the term of enlistment for sailors aboard American warships was expanded from one to two years. See Naval Documents Related to Barbary Powers, 2:51-52.

Smith to Morris, March 20, April 1, 20, 1802, ibid., 2:92, 99-100, 130.

For instance, the sole account of the January 18, 1802 cabinet meeting is Jefferson’s brief memorandum, which relates only the outcome of the conference and not what was discussed or whether there was any differences of opinion among the participants. However, the previous December, when Robert Smith issued orders for Adams to be repaired, he indicated that he expected the frigate to depart with the rest of the relief squadron then being readied for service. Therefore, it is possible he opposed the decision to keep the frigate in reserve but was overruled by the other members of the executive council. It is also not clear why the cabinet reversed its decision just a month or two later and gave Adams the green light to depart for the Mediterranean. See Smith to Daniel Ludlow, December 8, 1801, to Edward Preble, January 12, 1802, to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, January 29, 1802, to Richard Morris, April 1, 1802, ibid., 1:629-30, 2:19, 43, 99-100.

Smith to James Barron, August 13, 1802; Smith to John Rodgers, August 25, 1802, ibid., 2:233, 250. In July, Smith had been planning to send General Greene to the Mediterranean with $30,000 in tribute for Algiers and 100 gun carriages for Tunis. But General Greene was not suited for combat service, and, once apprised of the alarming situation in North Africa, he substituted New York, a frigate that would be a useful addition to Morris’s force. See Smith to Isaac Chauncey, July 21, 1802, James Madison to Smith, July 29, 1802, ibid., 2:206, 217; Gallatin to Jefferson, August 16, 1802, Writings of Gallatin, 1:87-88.

News about the problems with Morocco and Tunis arrived while both Jefferson and Madison were at their respective estates in Virginia, where they usually retired in August to escape the oppressive heat and humidity of the capital. As a result, most of the deliberations between Jefferson and his cabinet officers were carried out by post, leaving an unusually rich paper trail. The discussion can be followed in the following exchange of letters: Jefferson to Gallatin, August 9, 20, 23, 1802, Gallatin to Jefferson, August 16, 20, 1802, Writings of Gallatin., 1:83-84, 87-94; Jefferson to Madison, August 9, 23, 1802, Madison to Jefferson, August 14, 1802, Republic of Letters, 2:1234-35, 1239.

Quoted in McKee, Preble, 103.


Gallatin to Jefferson, January 18, 1803, *Writings of Gallatin*, 1:115-17; Gallatin to Jefferson, January 22, 1803, Jefferson Papers, reel 45. Under Gallatin’s revised plan, Congress would allocate $286,000 rather than $476,000 for the vessels in commission. The Navy Department would receive an additional $190,000 should one or more of the other Barbary powers enter the war. Jefferson was receptive to the suggestion, but Smith, who was caught off-guard by Gallatin’s actions, was not. With the House Ways and Means Committee impatiently waiting on the delivery of the naval estimates, Gallatin conceded defeat. For Smith’s original budget and the final appropriations bill, see Letter from the Secretary of the Treasury, October, 1802, no. 3314 and *Annals of Congress*. See also Smith to Jefferson, January 29, 1803, Gallatin to Jefferson, January 29, 1803, Jefferson Papers, reel 45.

To be sure, the consuls were also critical of the way the navy’s commanders were fighting the war, but they all agreed that decisive results could only be achieved with a more substantial naval force. See Richard O’Brien to Madison, May 20, 1802, William Eaton to Madison, June 8, 1802, February 1, 1803, James Simpson to Madison, September 3, 1802, James Cathcart to Madison, September 4, October 8, 1802 William Kirkpatrick to Madison, December 15, 1802, *Papers of Madison: Secretary of State Series*, 3:292-93, 542-44, 546; 4:3, 296-97.

Smith to Jefferson, March 17, 1803, Jefferson to Smith, March 29, 1803, Jefferson Papers, reel 45; Jefferson to Madison, March 22, 1803, *Republic of Letters*, 2:1268-69. Just a few days earlier, Captain Murray, fresh off the *Constellation*, had delivered a blistering report to Gallatin about the commodore’s behavior. Murray informed the treasury secretary that peace could have been concluded with the pasha for the nominal fee of $5000 last summer if Morris had shown his squadron off Tripoli. See Gallatin to Jefferson, March 21, 1803, *Writings of Gallatin*, 1:118-19. The matter did not end with Jefferson’s rebuff of Smith. The secretary’s brother Samuel got involved, and he sent Madison a pointed letter warning of the dire consequences if American shipping in the Mediterranean was denied adequate protection by the administration. A week later, Jefferson gathered with his cabinet to discuss the possibility of delaying the return of *Adams* and *Chesapeake*. All agreed, however, that it was too late to get new instructions to Morris. Interestingly enough, just a few days before the meeting, Smith had drafted orders informing Morris that he could retain the two frigates at his discretion. It’s not clear whether he dispatched the orders or checked with Jefferson before preparing them. See Samuel Smith to Madison, March 1, 1803, *Papers of Madison: Secretary of State Series*, 4:472-73; Robert Smith to Morris, April 6, 1803, *Naval Documents Related to Barbary Powers*, 2:387-88; Entry for April 8, 1803, *Anas of Jefferson*, 218-19.
Following the arrival of the *Adams* on July 21, 1802, there were actually four frigates on hand in the Mediterranean, but the number slipped back to three with the departure of the *Boston* in early September.


“An act to provide additional armament for the protection of the seamen and commerce of the United States” was signed into law by Thomas Jefferson on February 28, 1803. See *Annals*, 7th Congress, 2nd Session, 1565. The *Syren*, *Argus*, and *Vixen* were all brand-new vessels built by private contractors according to the department’s specifications. The *Nautilus* was acquired by purchase. Work on the brigs and the one schooner proceeded quickly, and within seven months of the bill passing Congress, all three had been launched and sent to sea. The relative speed with which the three were constructed and commissioned would seem to vindicate Stoddert’s judgment that small vessels could be added to the navy on short notice when needed. For details about the ships, see Chapelle, Howard I. *The History of the American Sailing Navy: The Ships and their Development* (New York, 1949), 182-89.


Letter from Secretary of Treasury, for the year 1803, no. 3314.

Ironically, at the same time as these discussions were taking place in Washington, Preble was writing Smith of his need for additional ships to assist him in next year’s campaigning. See McKee, *Preble*, 175-76.

For a detailed and well-researched account of the *Philadelphia*’s grounding and capture, see the biography of her unfortunate captain by David F. Long, *Ready to Hazard: A Biography of Commodore William Bainbridge, 1774-1833* (Hanover, 1981), 71-77.

Jefferson attributed much of the negative fallout from the event to the panicky reaction of American officials in Europe and the Mediterranean, who responded to the news “as if they thought on the loss of one frigate, that every thing was lost.” See Jefferson to Madison, April 15, 1804, *Republic of Letters*, 2:1308; Jefferson to Smith, April 27, 1804, *Writings of Jefferson*, 8:301.

A fifth frigate, *John Adams*, was also sent out as a storeship armed en flute, meaning that most of her guns were dismounted and stowed in her hold. Smith gave Preble permission to retain the ship if he desired, but the secretary made it clear that he preferred
to use the *John Adams* to carry supplies and dispatches between the Mediterranean and Washington.


147 For the destruction of the *Philadelphia* and Preble’s spirited campaign against Tripoli, see McKee, *Preble*, 189-213, 235-308; Tucker, *Dawn Like Thunder*, 249-321.


149 Nine gunboats had actually been dispatched from the United States but one perished in the Atlantic. For details about the ships that joined the Mediterranean squadron over the summer, see Thomas Robinson, Jr. to Samuel Barron, June 1, 29, 1805; “U.S. Squadron in the Mediterranean,” [1806 or 1807], *Naval Documents Related to Barbary Powers* 6:35-42, 71, 143.

150 Irwin, *Diplomatic Relations with the Barbary Powers*, 149-154.

151 The most detailed account of Rodgers’s dealings with Tunis can be found in Charles O. Paullin, *Commodore John Rodgers: Captain, Commodore, and Senior Officer of the American Navy, 1773-1838* (Annapolis, 1967; first published 1909), 146-60.

152 For the resolution of the Moroccan crisis, see McKee, *Preble*, 139-72.


154 Julia H. Macleod blames Congress for failing to prosecute the war with more vigor, but her conclusions run counter to the historical record. See “Jefferson and the Navy.”
CHAPTER 4

THE JEFFERSONIAN SYSTEM IN ACTION, 1801-1811

Thomas Jefferson was fortunate in that the first two years of his presidency coincided with a lull in the twenty-five year struggle between revolutionary France and her European neighbors. The French armistice with Great Britain in 1801 restored Europe to a state of peace for the first time in almost a decade. In conjunction with the Franco-American accord worked out by Adams’s administration in 1800, the truce among the great powers on the continent removed any danger to U.S. merchant vessels traversing the Atlantic shipping lanes. Although a new threat to American shipping materialized soon enough in the form of Tripolitan corsairs, that menace was confined to the Mediterranean and, as Jefferson would discover, if not easily resolved, it could at least be contained with a limited application of naval force. Otherwise, all of the pressing concerns about the safety of trade and respect for American rights as a neutral carrier dissipated with the cessation of hostilities. Taking stock of the international landscape at the time of his inauguration, Jefferson looked forward to an era of “peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none.”

Jefferson wound up being disappointed on almost all accounts mainly because the peace in Europe failed to hold. Britain and France went to war again in 1803, and the two nations remained locked in a death struggle until the emperor Napoleon was finally
toppled from power in 1814. The renewal of the conflict once more turned the Atlantic basin into a battleground and created a hazardous environment for U.S. merchant vessels trading with Europe and the West Indies. The revival of the war at sea also forced Jefferson to grapple all over again with the contentious questions about national defense and neutral trade that had bedeviled the Federalists in the 1790s. The Federalists under Washington and Adams had sought a solution to these problems in the creation of a fleet that would protect the seaboard and maritime commerce. Jefferson, however, looked elsewhere for answers. He readily accepted the small naval force bequeathed to him by the Federalists. He was also willing to employ it in defense of American shipping in the Mediterranean. But he had no interest in continuing the ambitious plan of naval expansion begun by his predecessors. He also placed no stock in any of the principles that had animated Federalist naval policy. In short, Jefferson was determined to find some other formula for national security.

Jefferson's gunboat program was perhaps the most controversial result of his search for an alternative. But the gunboats were merely one part of the multi-faceted system conceived by Jefferson as president for coping with foreign threats. The cornerstone of his system remained economic coercion, as it had during the 1790s. To Jefferson, commercial sanctions rather than naval retaliation still offered the surest means of protecting the nation's trade from foreign interference, especially in times of European war. Reliance on economic reprisals, or "peaceable coercion" to use Jefferson's term, would enable the government to respond to attacks on American shipping while minimizing the risks of embroiling the country in a general European conflict. His devotion to this doctrine was based on the belief that European dependence on American
exports rendered foreign governments acutely vulnerable to economic pressure. Yet, Jefferson was no starry-eyed pacifist, as the Tripolitan War would clearly demonstrate. He also was not an airy-headed ideologue averse to all forms of military preparedness. Recognizing that sanctions were not foolproof, he elaborated on his system during the early 1800s, adding other weapons to the Republican arsenal in case war with another power should ever become unavoidable. For defense, he counted on a fleet of shallow-draft gunboats acting in conjunction with coastal fortifications and the militia to shield American ports and harbors from harm. At the same time, he was confident that the United States would be able to carry the war to the enemy by quickly mobilizing the manpower and maritime resources of the republic. Newly raised armies composed of citizen volunteers would overrun the enemy's colonial possessions on land while hordes of armed merchantmen and privateers devastated his shipping at sea.

This was the essence of the Jeffersonian system, a combination of commercial diplomacy, defensive preparations, and faith in private initiative. Jefferson trusted to these measures to guide the Republican ship-of-state through the perilous waters of the Napoleonic Wars. Jefferson's faith in his formula stemmed from the conviction that it was superior to the Federalists' reliance on brute military muscle in every way. It would promote prosperity at home and peace abroad without compromising the nation's security or honor. Equally important, it was also cheaper to implement and so harmonized with the goals of his domestic policy. Forswearing an expensive army and navy would allow Jefferson to proceed with two of his most cherished designs: the repeal of all internal taxes and the complete retirement of the national debt. Republicans continued to regard taxes and the debt as cancers on the body politic, and they considered the speedy
elimination of both as essential to the preservation of free government. Thus, the beauty of Jefferson’s system was that it promised to protect the American republic against all threats to its welfare, internal as well as external.

* * * *

Jefferson hoped to put ideas about economic coercion into practice during the Anglo-American crisis of 1793-94, but he was thwarted first by Congress and then by Federalist diplomacy. To the disgust and dismay of the Republicans, the Jay Treaty of 1795 specifically prohibited the government from taking any sort of discriminatory action against Great Britain for the 10-year duration of the treaty’s commercial articles. But while his theory went untested, Jefferson remained steadfast in his certainty as to its effectiveness. During the early stages of the Quasi-War with France, Jefferson wrote Thomas Pinckney that the nation’s current troubles could have been averted if the administration had made an example of Britain in 1793-94 by retaliating against Royal Navy attacks on U.S. trade with commercial sanctions:

War is not the best engine for us to resort to. Nature has given us one in our commerce which, if properly managed, will be a better instrument for obliging the interested nations of Europe to treat us with justice. If the commercial regulations had been adopted which our legislature were at one time proposing, we should at this moment have been standing on such an eminence of safety and respect as ages can never recover.

After his election, Jefferson continued to champion the idea of economic retaliation as a cure-all response to European aggression. In March 1801, he declared:

Our commerce is so valuable to [the nations of Europe] that they will be glad to purchase it when the only price we ask is to do us justice. I believe we have in
our hands the means of peaceable coercion; and that the moment they see our
government so united as that they can make use of it, they will for their own
interest be disposed to do us justice.\textsuperscript{5}

As the phrase “peaceable coercion” implies, economic retaliation was a system
designed to avoid war. Jefferson was confident that foreign governments would go out
of their way to avoid antagonizing the fledgling republic for fear of losing access to
American agricultural goods and to American markets, both of which were essential to
the prosperity of their own economies. Thus, the realization among European rulers that
it was in their best interest to woo the Americans as friends would serve, in most cases, to
deter hostile action on the part of other powers.\textsuperscript{6} Even as he touted the virtues of his
system, however, Jefferson was enough of a realist to recognize that nations did not
always behave rationally. A foreign leader might provoke a war even when common
sense indicated that the loss of commercial connections with the United States would be
harmful to the belligerent power in the end. Jefferson also understood that there were
injuries and outrages short of war against which precautions still had to be taken. For
both of these reasons, Jefferson recognized that he could not rely entirely on economic
coercion to defend the nation’s interests, honor, and territorial integrity. Other means of
protection had to be developed.

Throughout the 1790s, as the leader of the party that was out of power, Jefferson
had the luxury of being able to criticize the Federalists’ military program without
necessarily having to offer any specific alternatives of his own. During Adams’
presidency, Jefferson monitored the progress of the government’s military buildup
closely, but his comments on the subject were always framed in negative terms,
explaining to his correspondents what he was against without ever articulating what he
favored himself.\textsuperscript{7} The sole exception was a letter to Elbridge Gerry in 1799, which was the closest Jefferson came to issuing a clear-cut statement of his views on national defense during the Federalist era. In what he described as “a profession of my political faith,” Jefferson wrote:

I am for relying, for internal defence, on our militia solely, till actual invasion, and for such a naval force only as may protect our coasts and harbors from such depredations as we have experienced; and not for a standing army in time of peace, which may overawe the public sentiment; nor for a navy, which, by its own expenses and the eternal wars in which it will implicate us, will grind us with public burthens, and sink us under them.\textsuperscript{8}

Jefferson intended the letter to distinguish his position from the Federalists’, and the first part of the quoted passage seems to suggest that he favored a fleet of frigates and light vessels that would function like an armed coast guard, patrolling the nation’s coastal waters and fending off the European cruisers and privateers that sometimes harassed friendly merchantmen entering or leaving U.S. ports. But this is speculation only, as the generalized language Jefferson employed offers limited insight into his true intentions regarding the navy.\textsuperscript{9}

Once elected president, Jefferson was no longer able to define his stance on military matters in terms of what he opposed. Instead, he had to devise a concrete and positive program of his own. In fashioning a defense policy for his administration, Jefferson’s overriding concern was the expense. As related in the previous chapter, Jefferson took office in 1801 determined to reverse the course of deficit-spending and taxation that the Federalists had pursued with such reckless abandon in the 1790s. It should be remembered, though, that Jefferson’s desire to extinguish the debt reflected more than just fiscal prudence or conservatism on his part or that of his treasury chief
Albert Gallatin. To Jefferson, Gallatin, and other Republican leaders, a financial system based on deficits, loans, and taxes not only risked economic disaster; more seriously, such a system courted political ruin as well. What this meant in practice was that military policy would have to conform to the constraints imposed by fiscal policy. On several occasions during his presidency, Jefferson allowed that he could foresee a time when, released from its burden of debt, the young republic would be able to invest freely in the means of national defense. But until that day arrived, the government would have to exercise the utmost restraint when it came to spending on both branches of the armed forces.

The Peace Act passed by the lame duck Congress in early 1801 simplified one part of Jefferson’s job by settling in advance what the peacetime configuration of the small American navy would be. During the first few months of the new administration, all of the vessels classified as expendable were sold off and the frigates placed in ordinary, except for the six designated for immediate or future assignment in the Mediterranean. Jefferson also called a halt to the construction on the six 74s, although, at Robert Smith’s doing, navy personnel at the yards worked diligently to collect and preserve the materials that had been ordered for the ships by the former secretary, Benjamin Stoddert. Smith’s intervention also saved some of the navy yards from being sold. Acting on the advice of Gallatin, who doubted both the legality of the yards’ purchase and the necessity of maintaining six, Jefferson advised Congress in his first annual message to consider disposing of several of them. Republican legislators lost interest, though, after Smith informed a House committee that the costs for removing the timber and other articles from any particular yard would run $20,000 or higher. The six
yards were retained, but the plans for adding wharves, warehouses, building slips, and other improvements to the sites were quietly shelved.\textsuperscript{15}

The army was also quickly taken care of during Jefferson’s first year in office. For all of the heated antimilitary rhetoric employed by Republicans in the 1790s, Jefferson was no more inclined to abolish the army then he was to dismantle the navy. It was axiomatic among the party faithful--Jefferson included--that “a well-disciplined militia” was both the safest and soundest instrument of national defense during times of peace and in the first moments of war. But this still left some need for a body of regular soldiers, both to garrison key posts on the frontier and to serve as the nucleus of a larger force which could be assembled in the event of actual invasion.\textsuperscript{16} At the end of Adams’ administration, the size of the regular army had been set at around 5,500 men. Jefferson’s new Secretary of War, Henry Dearborn, calculated that 3,300 would be sufficient. The change in authorized strength turned out to be more cosmetic than real because by the time Congress approved Dearborn’s plan and passed the Peace Establishment Act of 1802, the army’s actual numbers had dwindled to 3,600.\textsuperscript{17} Nonetheless, Jefferson was entirely pleased with his administration’s efforts to prune the military establishment he had inherited from the Federalists. The army and navy, he reported to the Polish patriot Thaddeus Kosciusko in 1802, have been reduced “to what is barely necessary.” These and other economies, he went on, “have enabled [Congress] to suppress all the internal taxes, and still to make such provision for the payment of their public debt as to discharge that in eighteen years.”\textsuperscript{18}

Jefferson’s letter to Kosciusko conveyed his satisfaction with the cuts made to the military. But two issues related to defense policy still troubled him. The first was the
Jefferson and other Republican leaders were counting on the militia to serve as the nation’s principal means of defense, but they also recognized that the institution in its present form was deficient on many accounts. The Congressional act that established the militia system in 1792 placed almost all responsibility for the organizing and training of militia units in the hands of the state governments. The law also left it to individual citizens to provide themselves with the necessary weaponry and equipment for militia duty. This arrangement ensured that the structure, standards, and armament of the militia would be far from uniform. Even worse, it failed to give the federal government any power to enforce compliance with the law. Jefferson and his advisors appreciated the inherent flaws in the militia system and the need for change if the nation was to trust its safety to the citizen-defense forces raised by the states. In his first annual address, Jefferson advised Congress “to amend the defects which from time to time show themselves in the laws for regulating the militia until they are sufficiently perfect. Nor should we now or at any time separate until we can say we have done everything for the militia which we could do were an enemy at the door.” Jefferson kept the wording vague and non-prescriptive, a style he followed in many of his communications to Congress, but the implication was clear enough: the militia system required mending. This statement was the first in what would become a perennial plea for militia reform in Jefferson’s messages to Congress.

The other issue that worried the new president was the state of the nation’s maritime defenses. By 1801, the United States already encompassed an immense amount of territory, stretching halfway across the continent to the banks of the Mississippi River. With the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory in 1803, the country’s borders moved
even further westward, expanding all the way out to the Rocky Mountains. But even as the republic nearly doubled in size, its center of gravity remained fixed in the east, tied to the seaport settlements on the Atlantic coast. The towns and cities along the seaboard were the most populous communities in the country. At the time of Jefferson’s election, seventeen of the twenty largest cities in America were ports. They were the wealthiest, too, housing large concentrations of bank capital and mercantile property. Most vital of all, in the commercially-oriented U.S. economy, these places functioned as the critical nodes or gateways that connected the vast American hinterland with the broader reaches of the Atlantic world. The major ports in particular served as the collection point for bulk commodities from the interior and the lesser ports that were intended for export overseas. They also acted as the distribution center for arriving imports. Overall, the ports played an essential role in facilitating the free-flow exchange of goods, foreign and domestic, upon which the economic well-being of the nation depended. Securing the safety of American ports and harbors, therefore, was a matter of great national import.

Americans in the post-Revolutionary era were acutely aware of the vulnerability of their seaport cities to naval attack. During the Revolution, almost every major American port at one time or another had fallen into British hands. In the decades following the war, Americans were haunted by the specter of an enemy squadron sailing into the harbor of a major seaport and reducing the shipping and waterfront property there to a smoking ruin. People worried that New York or some other city might be bombarded or even held for ransom beneath the guns of a hostile fleet. In response to the successive crises with Britain and France in the 1790s, Federalists had launched a program to fortify twenty different sites along the coast. Dubbed the First System by
historians, the Federalist initiative was indeed the first time Americans had attempted to create an organized plan of coastal defense that was funded at the national level. But as systems went, this was one very limited both in its scope and its scale. Total government spending on the fortifications from 1794 to 1801 amounted to about $830,000, which was a fairly meager sum considering the magnitude of the undertaking. The program still left long stretches of the seaboard without any defenses, while shortages of money or other problems prevented some of the proposed works from being completed. The fortifications that were finished were also less than impressive, as most were small, rudimentary in design by European standards, and constructed mainly of packed earth that eroded quickly over time. The Federalist program can be credited with providing some protection to a few of the larger cities along the coast, but as a whole, the country’s maritime frontier at the end of John Adams’ presidency remained lightly guarded.24

After 1800, devising a plan of defense for the nation’s many ports and harbors became Jefferson’s responsibility. And as Jefferson readily admitted, coastal security was a problem that defied an easy solution. “The fortifications of our harbors, more or less advanced, present considerations of great difficulty,” he informed Congress in December 1801. While some locales were sufficiently protected by existing works, other places would require fortifications that “will cost so much in their first erection, so much in their maintenance, and require such a force to garrison them as to make it questionable what is best now to be done.”25 Jefferson’s uncertainty stemmed from more than just his own administration’s assessment of the situation. The pessimistic tenor of his message also reflected the discouraging conclusions of a report on the defense of New York harbor that crossed the president’s desk in November. The study had been commissioned
by the state government of New York. Federal law permitted any state owing money to the national government to pay down its debt by expending its own revenue on coastal fortifications within its borders. This was an attractive option for New York, which owed the federal treasury close to $2 million in 1800. Up through 1798, the state legislature had already contributed $225,000 of its own funds for the construction of works in the city’s inner harbor and along the Narrows, the slender waterway the linked the inner to the outer harbor. Planning to spend even more in the near future, state authorities employed a French military engineer, Monsieur de Pusy, to conduct a detailed appraisal of the city’s defense requirements. Pusy concluded that the port could best be protected by erecting a major fort at Sandy Hook, the thin spit of land jutting out from New Jersey that framed the southern end of the entrance to the upper bay. Although the mouth of the bay was several miles wide, ships approaching New York had to sail close to the Hook in order to avoid the sandbanks that stretched southward from Long Island.  

Unfortunately, Jefferson’s papers in the Library of Congress contain only the cover letter accompanying the report and his response to it. The report itself is missing, so one can only speculate about the dimensions and features of the proposed fortification. Nonetheless, judging from the few details that can be gleaned from Jefferson’s letter, the Frenchman must have suggested building a defensive complex that was both intricate and immense. Pusy estimated that the fort and supporting outerworks would cost in the neighborhood of $4 million and would require a garrison of 8,000 men plus a covering army of 29,000 soldiers.

To the administration, the engineer’s findings were disheartening for several reasons. First, the expense and the troop numbers plainly exceeded the resources of the
national government, even if the New York state legislature supplied some of the
funding. Second, even if the elaborate and costly defensive works were erected, the
protection they provided was by no means foolproof. Enemy warships, the Frenchman
warned, could still run past the fort on Sandy Hook and gain access to the inner harbor.
Third, these vast outlays of money and manpower were deemed necessary all for the sake
of defending a single location along the coast. After reviewing the study, Jefferson dryly
observed that the engineer’s plan “is beyond our present ideas of the scale of defence
which we can adopt for all our sea port towns.” For the president, the report offered
proof—if proof was needed—that defending the seaports by a conventional system of
European-style fortifications would be impossibly expensive and impractical, not to
mention ineffective. This realization presented Jefferson and his cabinet with a dilemma.
They could face the facts and accept the porous condition of the nation’s maritime
defenses, making what improvements they felt the country could afford over time. Or
they could look for some other way to render the nation’s maritime frontier safe from
attack. No action was taken on the engineer’s study, but in Jefferson’s own mind, the
report did prepare the ground in which his gunboat program would later take root and
germinate.

The seeds of the idea were actually sown, however, in response to the crisis that
developed along the nation’s landlocked frontier to the west. The trouble started in 1801
when Jefferson learned from reliable sources that Spain had ceded the province of
Louisiana to France. The administration regarded this intelligence with considerable
trepidation.28 While the Spanish had not exactly been the best of neighbors, they were
not a threatening one either. Most Americans assumed it was only a matter of time
before Spain’s holdings in North America passed into the hands of the United States. France was a different matter. The French possessed a powerful army and a brilliant general-ruler, Napoleon Bonaparte, who was known to harbor ambitions of restoring France’s New World empire to its former greatness. If the French took up residence in Louisiana, they would present both an insuperable obstacle to future expansion and a standing threat to existing American settlements in the trans-Appalachian region. French occupation of New Orleans would also give Napoleon a chokehold on American navigation of the Mississippi, jeopardizing the livelihood of western farmers who depended on the river to get their agricultural surpluses to market. In a much-quoted letter, Jefferson wrote, “There is on the globe in single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy. It is New Orleans. . . . France placing herself in that door assumes to us the attitude of defiance.”

The administration was still pondering the implications of Louisiana’s cession and waiting for the formal handover to take place when the situation took another alarming turn in October of 1802. That month, the acting Spanish Intendant of Louisiana terminated the American right to deposit goods at New Orleans. The decree violated the terms of the 1795 treaty between the two nations. American nerves were already on edge from the expectation that a French expeditionary force would soon be landing at New Orleans, and the official’s proclamation heightened apprehensions of what would happen once Spain surrendered control of Louisiana to Napoleon. The closure of the port infuriated Americans in all parts of the country, but the angriest outbursts came from Westerners and Federalists. Politicians and public spokesmen in both groups called for a pre-emptive strike against New Orleans to seize the city before the French arrived.
Jefferson did not rule out a military response, but like Washington and Adams before him during similar war crises, he preferred to try diplomacy first. In early 1803, the president dispatched fellow-Virginian James Monroe as a special envoy to Europe with instructions to purchase New Orleans if possible and to do whatever else was necessary to secure American navigation rights on the Mississippi. At the same time, however, the administration did take a few small steps to shore up the nation’s military position in the west. During the spring of 1803, Secretary of War Henry Dearborn shifted some troops and cannon to the main army post opposite New Orleans. He also issued orders to establish an arsenal and magazine in Kentucky near the banks of the Ohio River. The navy took an active part, too, in the government’s efforts to prepare for a possible confrontation with Spain or France. In February, Secretary Robert Smith approached Congress seeking funds to build a flotilla of gunboats. Smith wanted eight gunboats, but this was one of the rare occasions when the legislature was in the mood to grant the executive more than it requested. Later in the month, Congress appropriated $50,000 for the construction of fifteen gunboats. The provision passed with no recorded discussion and it was attached to a law authorizing the addition of four light vessels for use in the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, the gunboats were clearly slated for service on the nation’s inland waterways, as Smith started making arrangements to build the craft on the Ohio River as soon as the bill cleared Congress. In all likelihood, the gunboats were intended to support the army in its operations on the frontier while also providing the government with a naval force capable of keeping the Mississippi River open to American shipping, regardless of who controlled New Orleans.
The administration’s actions in the first part of 1803 demonstrate that Jefferson did not discount the possibility that the Mississippi crisis could lead to conflict. But the modest nature of its preparations and the leisurely pace at which they were pursued also show that the administration did not think an armed showdown was imminent. Jefferson made no move to mobilize any of the 80,000 militia whose call out had been authorized by a Senate resolution in February. The navy also appeared to be in no rush to follow through on its share of the military measures approved by Congress. In mid-March, Smith notified the navy agent at Philadelphia that he planned to begin work on the gunboat flotilla by having two built at Pittsburgh “by way of experiment.” Once the department had an opportunity to assess how these vessels were progressing, then it would decide where and according to what design the remainder would be constructed. Overall, Jefferson appeared content to bide his time, in the hopes that either Monroe’s efforts in Paris or a favorable change in the international climate like a resumption of the war between France and Britain would deliver New Orleans to America’s protective embrace. “My hope was to palliate and endure,” Jefferson afterwards explained to a friend. As it turned out, his policy of waiting paid off in spectacular fashion. By the spring of 1803, Napoleon had abandoned his dreams of empire-building in the New World following the decimation of the French force sent to subdue the Haitian rebels on the island of Santo Domingo. Facing the prospects of renewed conflict with Britain, he offered to hand over, for a price, not just New Orleans but the entire territory of Louisiana. The acquisition of Louisiana resolved the crisis and settled American concerns about navigation on the Mississippi. The agreement with France also brought a halt to the administration’s gunboat project by eliminating the need for a squadron of
armed vessels on the river. The change in plans did not cause the Navy Department any loss or inconvenience, as no timber had been felled or contracts signed. In fact, the only concrete steps taken towards the construction of the gunboats had been the placement of notices soliciting bids from shipwrights in several towns along the Ohio. When official confirmation of the Louisiana Treaty reached Washington in July 1803, the entire sum of $50,000 that had been allocated for the gunboats remained intact and untouched in the Treasury.

Towards the very end of the year, however, the government’s interest in gunboats revived and Smith ordered two experimental models built at yards along the east coast. The decision to resume work on the vessels occurred at roughly the same time that Commodore Edward Preble, having absorbed the stunning news that the frigate Philadelphia had run aground in Tripoli Harbor, was scouring the Mediterranean for gunboats that could be hired or purchased for use in the next round of naval operations against Tripoli. Some naval historians, noting the concurrence of these events, have linked them, attributing the resurrection of the gunboat program to the fact that the vessels were needed in the ongoing war with Tripoli. But this assumption is incorrect. The Navy Department did furnish the builders of the first two gunboats with the drawings of a Neopolitan gunboat for inspiration and guidance. Furthermore, eight of the first ten gunboats completed were dispatched to the Mediterranean in 1805 to reinforce the squadron commanded by Preble’s successor, Samuel Barron. Yet, the administration’s decision to press ahead with the gunboats in late 1803 was unrelated to the situation in the Mediterranean and was instead directly connected to developments taking place much
closer to home, within American coastal waters, brought about by the collapse of the fragile truce between France and Great Britain.

The renewal of hostilities in 1803 did not produce any sweeping crackdown on American shipping as Britain had carried out a decade earlier at the beginning of the war with Revolutionary France. Indeed, since the mid-1790s, London had adopted a lenient attitude towards the carrying trade, permitting U.S. ships to transport goods between France’s colonial possessions and Europe as long as such vessels made a stopover in an American port and paid duties on their cargoes. Individual warships and privateers flying British colors, however, were less respectful of America’s status as a neutral. Upon the outbreak of war, British cruisers took up station off the American coast. They were hunting for French prizes, but they would also overhaul U.S. vessels to inspect their papers as they left port.37 “Thornton [the British charge d’affaires] says they watch our trade only to prevent contraband. We say it is to plunder,” Jefferson complained to Madison in August 1803.38 Even more provoking was the British practice of boarding American merchant ships to search for deserters or sailors of British origins who could be pressed into service. The British government defended the practice of impressment as a necessity and maintained it had the right to look for and reclaim the labor of British mariners serving aboard the private shipping of any nation. To Americans, impressment was an affront to the flag at best and tantamount to kidnapping at worst, as many U.S. nationals were caught up in the British dragnet. Distinguishing British tars from American sailors was difficult under any circumstances, but the problem was compounded by different conceptions of citizenship. The British refused to accept the
liberal naturalization laws of the United States and instead held to the position that national allegiance was a permanent condition fixed at birth.\textsuperscript{39}

The truce between Britain and France in 1801 brought American ships a respite from visits by the press gang, but the Admiralty revived the onerous practice with the resumption of fighting in 1803. The British also extended its geographic range. During the 1790s, impressment had largely been limited to American vessels found in European waters or the West Indies. In the summer of 1803, however, Royal Navy commanders started searching ships and seizing sailors in the vicinity of the American coast.\textsuperscript{40} These incidents were all the more galling because the very cruisers harassing U.S. shipping were also using American ports to replenish their provisions and refit their vessels. The behavior of British naval officers in American waters left Jefferson and Madison fuming. “How can Ships of war expect to enjoy the hospitality of our ports if they make it subservient to the cruising agst. our commerce & seamen?” Madison wrote after learning about the impressment of several Americans from a ship that had just cleared Norfolk. Jefferson shared Madison’s anger and mused that it might be necessary “to have a battery or two in our principal seaports, and to require armed vessels to lie under them” as a way of preventing belligerent warships from abusing their privileges.\textsuperscript{41}

By the end of the year, the situation had grown appreciably worse. “Impressments and other outrages on our flag are multiplying, and the depredations under pretext of blockades, are going on in rivalship with all the extravagances of the last war,” Madison reported to James Monroe, who had recently settled in as the American envoy in London.\textsuperscript{42} When Congress convened in October 1803, Jefferson said nothing about setting up batteries of heavy cannon to enforce respect for American rights at gunpoint,
but he did propose another idea that he had been contemplating since the summer. In his annual message, he urged legislators to adopt more stringent laws respecting the conduct of armed vessels in American ports and to strengthen the government’s ability to punish transgressors. After mentioning the unexpended appropriations for the gunboats in an earlier paragraph, the president also stressed the need “to establish in our harbors such a police as may maintain law and order.” Congress dutifully acted on the first suggestion and brought forward a bill imposing various restrictions on belligerent cruisers. The act also gave the executive the right to deny aid and sustenance to any foreign ship that violated U.S. regulations. The bill, however, stalled due to disagreements between the two chambers over the exact terms of the measure and, with time running short at the end of the session, the Senate voted to postpone further debate on the matter until the start of the next session. Jefferson was spared the trouble of seeking Congressional approval for his other recommendation—building the gunboats—since money for the vessels had already been allocated. Once again, though, the administration preferred to proceed cautiously with the craft, electing to build only two at first so it could judge the results before committing resources to the construction of the others. “We do not wish you to hasten the building of the Boat to her detriment—take time—have the materials prepared in our own way and have the Boat made as perfect as possible,” Smith instructed Captain John Rodgers, who had been appointed to superintend the building of gunboat No. 1. The administration’s attitude changed early the following summer after a rash of new provocations occurred in American waters. This time, the perpetrators were not just British cruisers. French privateers from the West Indies annoyed American commerce off the coast of the southern states and committed a number of outrages at the ports of
Savannah and Charleston. Spanish smugglers also flouted the law along the Gulf coast. In the face of these affronts, the administration’s options were limited. As of mid-June, 1804, neither of the two trial gunboats was quite ready for service while plans for Nos. 3 through 10 were still in the drafting stage. Frustrated by American impotence, Jefferson implored Smith to accelerate preparations for the new gunboats. “The calls for our gunboats at Charleston, Savannah, Mobile & N. Orleans are very imperious,” he wrote on June 15, 1804. “[C]ould not your orders go immediately to the constructors to be making all the necessary provisions, preparations, and contracts, so that the boats may be got ready as expeditiously as possible?”

The events unfolding at New York added to Jefferson’s anguish. A squadron of Royal Navy warships had been cruising off the port since May of the previous year, stopping vessels and impressing seamen. In the summer of 1804, the British stepped up their interference with American trade to the point where New York was held in a state of semi-blockade. The British actions were particularly obnoxious because some of the searches and impressments occurred in New York harbor or within America’s jurisdictional limits, three miles or less from the coast.

The belligerents’ encroachments on U.S. neutrality and flagrant disregard of American law left Jefferson more convinced than ever that these abuses could not be allowed to stand. He was still hopeful that the misconduct in the nation’s harbors could be checked by legislative means. Jefferson had in mind an even sterner measure than the one Congress debated the previous winter that would allow the government to bar foreign warships from entering U.S. ports if their conduct warranted it. The president also realized, however, that all of the statutory authority in the world would be useless unless there was sufficient force on hand to compel obedience to the law. What the nation
needed, he concluded, were additional gunboats, enough so that “every port in which an armed belligerent can enter” would have one or more of the vessels “to preserve order.”

In this fashion, what had started out in early 1803 as a modest project to construct some armed vessels on the Mississippi had, by mid-1804, blossomed into something larger: a plan to establish a coastal constabulary that could enforce the law, evict offenders, and ensure that tranquility prevailed in American ports and harbors.

Yet, the usefulness of the gunboats did not end with their ability to preserve order in U.S. waters. At some point during the summer or early fall of 1804, Jefferson began to conceive of an additional and more ambitious role for the gunboats. Besides keeping the peace in American harbors, the gunboats could also serve as the nation’s first line of coastal defense in the event of war. Exactly how and why Jefferson became so enamored with gunboats cannot be determined with any certainty. Jefferson was certainly much impressed with the qualities of the first gunboat built by the navy. The vessel “so far exceeds out expectations and is a really fine sea boat,” he wrote enthusiastically to Massachusetts Congressman Jacob Crowninshield in July 1804. He also entertained a very inflated conception of their abilities. If the eight gunboats under construction were finished, he informed his navy secretary in September 1804, he would send the lot of them to clear out the British frigates that were annoying U.S. shipping in New York harbor. Precisely how a squadron of gunboats mounting at most two heavy guns apiece would evict several warships carrying between 20 and 36 cannon each was left unsaid, but Jefferson’s remarks were indicative of the great confidence he placed in the gunboats’ effectiveness in combat against vessels of any rating.
Years later, Jefferson defended his policy on gunboats, maintaining that it simply made no sense to invest in a larger navy after the British had smashed the French and Spanish fleets at the Battle of Trafalgar in the fall of 1805. Historians sympathetic to Jefferson have accepted his explanation. However, Jefferson's own letters from the critical period prior to Trafalgar suggest a different conclusion. His letters demonstrate that he had already determined to build a huge fleet of gunboats well before the battle took place. Complaining about Federalist criticisms of his 4th annual address in which he broached the idea of using gunboats for harbor defense, Jefferson wrote to Wilson Cary Nicholas in December 1804: "Is it their interest to scout a defense by gunboats in which they would amply share, in hopes of a navy which will not be built in our day, & would be no defence if built . . . ?" A month later, in a letter to Joseph H. Nicholson, chairman of the House Naval Affairs Committee, Jefferson laid bare his thoughts on gunboats in some detail. A force of 240 gunboats, he assured Nicholson, would provide ample security to the nation's principal ports and harbors.

It would be unfair to say, as some historians have suggested, that Jefferson saw the gunboats as the equivalent of a seagoing navy. Jefferson understood that the vessels’ restricted cruising range limited their overall utility. As he candidly acknowledged to Congress in 1807, “It must be superfluous to observe that this species naval armament is proposed merely for defensive operation; that it can have but little effect towards protecting our commerce in the open seas, even on our own coast.” Jefferson viewed the gunboats not so much as a stand-in for a bluewater fleet but as a substitute for an expensive system of coastal fortifications. As his letter to Nicholas quoted above shows, by late 1804 Jefferson had ruled out the idea of entrusting the defense of the
nation’s maritime frontier to a mixed force of capital ships as the Federalists had planned to do. Expanding the navy by building more frigates or even reviving Stoddert’s program to construct ships-of-the-line was simply not an option in his eyes. The real issue to decide was whether the government would invest its limited fiscal resources on gunboats or an extensive system of coastal fortifications. Gallatin highlighted precisely this point in his remarks on a draft of Jefferson’s 1804 address to Congress. Commenting on the section pertaining to the president’s plan to build a flotilla of gunboats, Gallatin wrote, “The object of these gunboats as a substitute for fortifications versus naval enterprise and for supporting our laws within our harbors is correctly defined.” Whether Congress and the public would grasp the true purpose of the program was another question. Gallatin cautioned Jefferson that efforts in the Federalist press to paint the gunboats as an alternative for a navy would create a distorted understanding of the administration’s intentions.  

Why did Jefferson prefer gunboats over fortifications? The overriding disadvantages of fortifications were that they would cost a bundle to build and would offer at best limited security to the places they were designed to protect. Jefferson had not forgotten the report of the French engineer who had studied the problem of harbor defense at New York in 1801. The Frenchman’s conclusions were still fresh in his mind in the winter of 1804-05 when Jefferson unveiled his gunboat program to Congress. In a private letter to the mayor of New York, DeWitt Clinton, Jefferson described the engineer’s extravagant plan to construct two forts at a cost of $4 million. He also recalled the crucial caveat that accompanied the expert’s recommendation: that these forts “would annoy enemy vessels but could not be depended on to prevent entry” into
the harbor.\textsuperscript{56} Gunboats, on the other hand, suffered from none of these drawbacks. They were cheap and fast to build and cost little to maintain. They were also mobile and so could be shifted and concentrated as needed to defend whatever points along the coast were threatened. Finally, unlike fortifications that were fixed in place and thus vulnerable to being bypassed, gunboats could use their maneuverability to harass an attacking fleet at all points during its approach. Jefferson’s support for gunboats did not mean he advocated dispensing with forts and other defensive preparations on land entirely. In fact, he favored the adoption of several other measures to complement the gunboats, including floating batteries on water, carriage-mounted artillery on land, and fixed emplacements and redoubts. The gunboats would thus form one element of an integrated system of defense.\textsuperscript{57} But they would also comprise the principal component and their construction in massed numbers would allow the administration to scale back on the building of traditional fortifications. To Jefferson, reliance on gunboats as the lynchpin of the nation’s coastal defenses offered a solution to what at first appeared to be an intractable problem--how to protect a seaboard that stretched for over two thousand miles. From late 1804 through the end of his presidency, Jefferson embraced gunboats as a panacea to the maritime security dilemma he had inherited from the Federalists.

Jefferson’s conception of the gunboat-centered defensive strategy was fully formulated when he wrote the letters cited above in the winter of 1804-1805. However, he was cautious about presenting his ideas in full to Congress. Instead, he thought the best way to introduce his plan was in a piecemeal fashion, asking Congress for a certain number of gunboats each year and slowly expanding the gunboat flotilla until it reached the size the administration desired. Jefferson calculated that approaching Congress in
this fashion would be less likely to stir up opposition or objections to the program.\textsuperscript{58} In accordance with this plan, Navy Secretary Smith asked Congress to fund the construction of additional gunboats for the year 1805 to go with the ten that had previously been authorized. The administration’s proposal provoked little debate or partisan rancor. Even the Federalists were willing to vote for the gunboat legislation out of the belief that some form of defense was better than none. The bill authorizing the building of 25 gunboats moved through Congress in a little less than two months and on March 2, 1805, Jefferson signed into law “an act for the better protection of ports and harbors of the United States.”\textsuperscript{59}

Jefferson’s lofty assessment of the gunboats’ defensive properties was the product of his own thinking, but his optimism was aided and abetted by the favorable opinions of two of the military men he turned to for advice: Generals Horatio Gates and James Wilkinson. While both individuals held important commands during the Revolution, their respective military careers were checkered to say the least and neither could claim any particular experience in naval matters. But those facts mattered less than their prominence within the Republican Party, which could otherwise boast of few persons with comparable military pedigrees. Gates and Wilkinson each responded enthusiastically to Jefferson’s overture. Gates informed Jefferson that he considered gunboats “to be the most proper defence for large harbors that has hitherto been imagined.” Gunboats acting in conjunction with batteries of heavy guns on the landward side “are much better, and infinitely less expensive, than fixed and large fortifications.” Wilkinson also endorsed Jefferson’s plan of coastal defense in his reply. The president
forwarded the statements of both men to Congress during the 1804-05 session that resulted in the approval of the bill to expand the gunboat fleet by 25.  

While Gates and Wilkinson waxed enthusiastic about the virtues of the gunboat program, the president’s cabinet viewed it in a more equivocal fashion. Gallatin acknowledged the vessels’ usefulness for their original purpose—maintaining order in American harbors—but he was less willing to countenance Jefferson’s plan to construct a whole fleet of gunboats for coastal defense. Since the craft could be constructed on relatively short notice, Gallatin believed it made more sense to delay the building of all but a few to the outbreak of an actual war. This way, the government would be saved from the expense of building several hundred gunboats that might never actually be needed. And should their services be required, then the necessary number could be built in a matter of months.  

Navy Secretary Robert Smith acted more like a silent partner on the administration’s gunboat program. In his communications with Congress and to navy personnel on gunboat-related matters, he parroted some of the language Jefferson used in his own public and private pronouncements. But he never presented to Jefferson anything like an independent evaluation of the gunboat scheme. Instead, he kept his own counsel while working with Congress and his department to implement the policy decided by Jefferson. Overall, during the period from 1804 through the summer of 1807, with one significant exception, there was little internal discussion within the cabinet about the general direction of the administration’s naval policy. Smith, Jefferson, and Gallatin corresponded frequently about the gunboats, but these letters dealt with carrying out the details of the program and securing Congress’s approval for their plans.
The exception occurred in 1805 and, ironically, it was Gallatin who was the instigator. Relations with Britain had been strained since the renewal of the war with Napoleon and, unbeknownst to Americans, London was about to adopt a much more hard-line policy with respect to neutral trading rights. But for most of the year, it was Spain that consumed a large share of the administration’s diplomatic energies. While the acquisition of Louisiana and the port of New Orleans in 1803 averted one major source of conflict with Spain, it also generated another in the form of a dispute over the eastern border of the Louisiana territory. Jefferson claimed that the boundaries of the territory extended to the Perdido River, encompassing what was then called West Florida. Spain flat out rejected the legitimacy of the American claim and denied that this region had ever been part of the colony of Louisiana. The controversy over West Florida was compounded by Spain’s refusal to make good on its promises to pay spoliation claims for the seizure of U.S. shipping in the late 1790s. By the summer of 1805, the diplomatic conflict with Spain was acute enough that Jefferson believed it might actually lead to war.62

It was during the imbroglio with Spain that Gallatin sent a remarkable letter to Jefferson suggesting that the moment might be ripe to begin investing in naval expansion. The prospects of a confrontation with Spain put Gallatin in an uncustomarily martial frame-of-mind, and it was in this mood that he set down his thoughts on the future of the American navy to Jefferson. At present, government revenue was running higher than expected, Gallatin reported. Assuming the Mediterranean fund was continued, the treasury could anticipate an annual surplus of $2 million. He proposed allocating the bulk of these funds towards new naval construction, devoting one-million dollars a year
to ships-of-the-line and an additional sum to frigates. Spending the surplus is this fashion would, in the space of a few years, equip the United States with a fleet of roughly ten-to-twelve ships-of-the-line plus a large number of frigates, putting the nation’s naval strength on par with that of Spain. Gallatin admitted to having mixed emotions about such a prospect. Whether a navy might draw “us in the usual vortex of expenses and foreign relations, to be the cause of greater evils than those it is intended to prevent” was a question best left for Congress to decide; yet, he also stated that without a navy, “we must perpetually be liable to injuries and insults” when the maritime states of Europe were at war.63

Either by coincidence or, more likely, in consultation with Gallatin, Smith also approached Jefferson with an almost identical recommendation. He attributed the failure of negotiations with Spain to the feeble condition of the nation’s military establishments on land as well as at sea. Abandoning the party line on gunboats, Smith implored the president to resurrect the plan of expansion launched by Stoddert in the twilight of Adams’s presidency. Once the U.S. possessed a dozen ships-of-the-line and a similar number of frigates, he wrote, “we should have nothing to fear from a nation such as Spain.”64

Jefferson did not reply directly to either Gallatin’s or Smith’s letters, so it is hard to say precisely what impression their entreaties made on him. But at least some echo of their recommendations found their way into the message Jefferson delivered to Congress in December 1805. In his address, he mentioned that materials were still on hand for the building of six ships-of-the-line. Jefferson’s statement fell a good deal short of being a serious endorsement of naval expansion. On the subject of gunboats, Jefferson’s language was direct and prescriptive: He reminded Congress of their importance and
recommending the building of a considerable number of the craft. When it came to the 74s, on the other hand, his remarks were phrased in such a way as to avoid the bare hint of an executive endorsement.\textsuperscript{65} In all likelihood, the reference to the construction of capital ships was a bit of saber-rattling intended to intimidate Spain into giving up West Florida voluntarily for a sum of money. Indeed, in a secret message presented to the legislature, Jefferson asked Congress to appropriate two-million dollars for precisely this purpose.\textsuperscript{66} Nonetheless, the address did serve to reopen the debate on naval expansion in Congress. Although without the president’s explicit backing, any plan of expansion was probably doomed to failure, the proceedings in Congress did provide legislators on both sides of the aisle with an opportunity to revisit the issue and renew the arguments of the 1790s.

To no one’s surprise, a bill embodying the president’s request for more gunboats again sailed through Congress with only minimal opposition. The bill appropriated $250,000 for fifty gunboats and another $150,000 for coastal fortifications. Ironically, on the same day this act became law in the spring of 1806, Congress also repealed the 1801 Peace Establishment Act that required the government to keep seven frigates in commission.\textsuperscript{67} With the American naval operations against Tripoli coming to a close, Jefferson wanted the freedom to reduce the number of ships in service as he saw fit. At the administration’s behest, Congress replaced the Peace Establishment Act with a new law capping the number of seaman on active duty at 925, which Jefferson judged sufficient for the manning of two frigates and two brigs. The rest of the navy’s cruising fleet would be placed in ordinary.\textsuperscript{68}
A committee in the House also reported on a resolution to appropriate $660,000 for the building of six ships-of-the-line. The deliberations over this resolution marked the first time since the Adams’ administration that Congress had seriously discussed the possibility of expanding the regular navy to any significant degree. The passage of time, however, had done nothing to dim the partisan ardor that the subject typically aroused. During the voting on the resolution, party divisions emerged with unmistakable clarity. Federalists supported the measure 22 to 1, while Republicans opposed it by a margin of 71 to 13. Of the small number of Republicans who broke party ranks on this vote, most were followers of George Clinton from New York who were growing increasingly disenchanted with the administration's apparent indifference to the commercial interests of the North.

Partisanship shaped not only the delegates' voting patterns but also their perceptions of the issue. Despite the defection of a handful of party members, Republicans still regarded the building of additional warships as a purely Federalist conceit. For having the temerity to speak out strongly in favor of the navy, Republican Matthew Lyon of Kentucky found himself branded a traitor and was accused of having joined the Federalist Party. Speaking more generally on the need to remain true to the party's founding principles a few years later, Virginia Republican James M. Garnett insisted that "a thing in its nature Federal, must remain so still to all eternity, altho' it may happen to be done by men generally called Republicans." Outside the halls of Congress, Federalists and Republicans in newspapers, pamphlets, and public speeches helped to keep these partisan associations alive by arguing the merits of the navy along party lines. While Federalists regularly lamented the feeble condition of the nation's
naval armaments, Republicans responded by assailing the Federalists for the naval
schemes they had pursued in the 1790s. Such attacks usually occurred in the context of
broad condemnations of the entire Federalist program of the previous decade. 73 "The
standing army, costly navy, and eight per cent loan, were suitable methods indeed, to
create and augment a public debt," one Fourth-of-July orator reminded his listeners in
1805. The intent of these measures, he continued, was to enrich a select few while
impoverishing the rest of the populace, in order to produce "that inequality, so essential
to monarchy." 74

Both inside and outside of Congress, Republicans also justified their opposition to
naval expansion on ideological grounds, making full recourse to the anti-navy arguments
party spokesmen had first articulated in the 1790s. A large naval establishment, "if ever
erected, may justly be considered the TOMB OF AMERICAN LIBERTIES, Tennessee
Representative George W. Campbell warned his constituents. 75 In a private note, John
Randolph of Virginia struck right to the heart of the Republicans' distrust of the navy.
Randolph conceded that a case could be made for strengthening the American navy. "But
what, my dear Sir, is to enable us to resist the influence necessarily attached to great
warlike apparatus, whether naval or military? It is the reaction upon our political
institutions that I dread." 76 Like Randolph, Republican publicist Tench Coxe also drew
no distinction between navies and armies, insisting that any "standing public force
requires caution, whether it be on the water or the land." 77 Samuel Harrison Smith, the
editor of the Washington *National Intelligencer* went a step further. In one of several
anti-navy editorials he published during Jefferson's presidency, Smith avowed that "such
is the correct state of the public mind, that we have nothing to fear from standing armies. It is only from a navy that we have any thing seriously to apprehend."\(^78\)

After the resolution to construct the ships-of-the-line went down in defeat in early 1806, another six years would elapse before Congress took up the issue of building new capital ships again. Pro-navy delegates made a weak attempt to revive the resolution at the next meeting of the legislature, but their effort was quashed before it could even be brought to the floor for debate. The Republican majority in Congress, however, also balked at funding the defensive measures the administration did support. In his annual address of December 2, 1806, Jefferson once more urged legislators to adopt the measures necessary to “to place our seaport towns and waters in that state of defense to which we are competent and they entitled.” At first, Congress consented to allocate a mere $20,000 towards coastal defense, although after subsequent debate the amount appropriated was boosted to $150,000. As part of the same bill, the House also voted to provide $250,000 for more gunboats.\(^79\) But before the Senate had the chance to act on the bill, word reached American shores that the American envoys to London, James Monroe and William Pinkney, had negotiated an agreement with Britain settling the two the principal points of contention between the two countries: impressment and the neutral trading rights. As soon as the senators learned of the Monroe-Pinkney treaty as the pact was called, their interest in gunboats evaporated. Republicans in the Senate with the connivance of the Federalist minority decided to strike out the clause appropriating money for the gunboats. Thus, when the session of Congress ended in March 1807, Jefferson’s gunboat program was left dead in the water for the moment.
The program might have stayed that way were it not for a series of developments. First, Jefferson chose to kill the treaty without submitting it to Congress. His dissatisfaction stemmed from the fact that it once more required the U.S government to forswear the use of commercial sanctions against Britain for the duration of the agreement. He was also unhappy with the safeguards the treaty provided against impressment. Far from giving up the odious practice, the British merely pledged to exercise the “greatest caution” when searching American merchant vessels for British deserters. As a result of Jefferson’s rejection of the treaty, the expected entente with Great Britain failed to materialize.

Second, both Britain and France stepped up their crackdown on neutral trade. The honeymoon for American carriers had actually ended in 1805 when the Admiralty issued the *Essex* decision prohibiting neutral nations in wartime from participating in a trade that was normally barred to them in peacetime. This ruling was aimed at the U.S. reexport trade with Spanish and French colonies, which the British had previously tolerated as long as the merchant vessels made a stopover at an American port. The *Essex* ruling was accompanied by widespread British seizures of American vessels that were found to be in violation of its terms. Ironically, as members of the opposition in the 1790s, Jefferson and Gallatin had condemned the carrying trade because it was risky and rewarded only the merchant without aiding the cause of American producers. But now that they occupied the executive branch, their position shifted. They recognized that the carrying trade generated a modest but still significant revenue for the federal government through the small duty paid by U.S. traders stopping at an American port before proceeding to their true destination. Furthermore, the British decree represented a huge
affront to the honor of the young republic. The *Essex* decision, however, turned out to be a harbinger of worse to come. In 1806, France and Britain issued a series of edicts that struck directly at the rights of American producers to export their goods to markets overseas. Each of the belligerents claimed that it was only retaliating against the illegal actions of the other. This justification offered scant solace to Americans who risked having their ships stopped and their cargo impounded by the agents of either nation.

Third, on June 22, 1807, the British warship *Leopard* overhauled the American frigate *Chesapeake* just off the Virginia capes. When the American captain refused to allow the *Leopard* to search his vessel for several deserters suspected of having joined the crew just a few days earlier, the British poured several broadsides into the frigate. Three men were killed and another eight wounded. Americans were stunned and outraged by the assault and in the immediate aftermath of the encounter, many insisted that the *Leopard*’s conduct was grounds for war. While the *Chesapeake* incident did not lead to war, it was still an event of signal importance because it dealt Anglo-American relations a blow from which they never recovered. The incident would soon be overshadowed by other points of dispute and the British would make partial amends for their actions; yet, Republicans could not easily forget the mauling the *Chesapeake* received as it seemed to confirm their worse suspicions about Britain’s malevolent intentions towards the young republic.

Furthermore, although Jefferson chose not to go to war over the incident, he did begin serious planning for a military conflict with Great Britain. In the immediate aftermath of the affair, Jefferson and his cabinet mapped out a detailed plan of operations that aimed at conquering Canada and securing the principal ports and harbors along the
American coastline from attack. From mid-1807 to the onset of actual hostilities in 1812, American military strategy deviated little from this basic blueprint. Two points stand out about the administration’s strategic designs. The first is that they were almost completely detached from reality. In the event of war, Jefferson planned to invade Canada at four different points along the frontier, overrunning the main British posts from Detroit to Montreal—all with an army of volunteer soldiers that existed on paper only. Gallatin entertained even more grandiose—or delusional—ideas, advising Jefferson that Halifax should also be seized and perhaps an amphibious expedition mounted against either Bermuda or Providence Island in the Bahamas. The other noteworthy feature about the administration’s plans for war is how little notice they took of the navy. No provisions were made for preparing a naval force on any of the northern lakes, although control of those waterways would be an important if not essential component of the offensive contemplated against Canada. The administration’s battle plans were also silent on the subject of the ten frigates and assorted smaller vessels that made up the nation’s seagoing fleet. The defense of key points along the coast would be entrusted to gunboat flotillas of varying size supported by fixed fortifications and batteries, garrisons of regular soldiers, and the militia. Towards this end, Jefferson and his advisors agreed to continue full bore with program of gunboat construction. But Jefferson saw little reason to mobilize the navy’s sailing warships. The frigates might be useful as receiving vessels for the crews of the gunboats, Jefferson noted, but beyond that their utility was marginal. Even a staunch supporter of the navy like Maryland Senator Samuel Smith acknowledged that it would be futile to send the frigates out against the Royal Navy. The war against British commerce, Smith and others maintained, should be
left to private enterprise, meaning the swarms of swift-sailing privateers that could be counted on to flood the shipping lanes, while the nation’s public warships were kept out of harm’s way.\textsuperscript{87}

As was always the case when a crisis occurred, Congress willingly went along with whatever the administration asked for. Indeed, if Jefferson had sought funding to resume construction on the 74-gun battleships, the legislature probably would have approved the measure. Instead, Jefferson requested sizable sums of money for more gunboats and fortifications. Congress complied with these requests and appropriated roughly $850,000 to build 188 gunboats and another $1,000,000 for coastal defense. At the same time, Congress also agreed to implement an embargo prohibiting the export of American goods and the sailing of American merchant shipping to any foreign destination. The embargo would go down as the most controversial measure of Jefferson’s two terms in office as president. It was also destined to be one of the most misunderstood. To begin with, passage of the embargo had nothing to do with the \textit{Chesapeake} affair. American sensibilities were still inflamed over the incident, but as Congress gathered in late 1807, it faced a far more pressing concern: the escalation of the commercial warfare between France and England. Towards the end of the year, France tightened its enforcement of the Berlin decree while Britain announced plans to issue a new Order-in-Council to go into effect in November 1807. Taken together, these edicts made it all but impossible for the United States to trade with Britain or the continent without violating one or the other set of restrictions.\textsuperscript{88} The embargo was thus first and foremost intended as a precautionary measure, to clear the seas of American traders to prevent their wholesale seizure by the British and French. Jefferson’s message to
Congress recommending an embargo was silent about its purpose, but he spelled out his motives very clearly in his private letters. “Britain and France have interdicted all of our trade,” he wrote to one correspondent. “If we are certain to lose our vessels upon their sailing, is it not better to keep them at home?”

An embargo differed from commercial sanctions in that the former was indiscriminate, cutting of intercourse with all nations, while Jefferson’s idea of peaceable coercion was intended to be selective, singling out the specific state or states that had abused American rights. Yet, the embargo did have a coercive component, since it denied France and especially Britain access to American commodities. As the embargo remained in force and the months passed in 1808, Jefferson gradually began to shift his justification for the measure and to emphasize its potential to force French and British to relax their policies towards neutral trades. This change in focus was made evident by the administration’s requested amendment to the embargo law in the spring of 1808 prohibiting the export of American goods by land as well as by sea. Jefferson’s own writings again provide the best clues as to how his views on the embargo evolved. In March 1808, he explained to his attorney general, Levi Lincoln, that the embargo was “the last card we have to play short of war.” He also stressed that the embargo was a temporary measure, intended to buy time for the U.S. to carry out the military preparations approved by Congress. He was also hopeful that the military situation in Europe might change, leading one or both of the warring powers to abandon their trade restrictions. Over time, though, Jefferson began to focus on the embargo’s coercive rather than defensive function. While Gallatin wanted the embargo lifted after a certain amount of time had elapsed, Jefferson sided with Madison in arguing that it should
remain in force until the belligerents had suffered enough to see the error of their ways. Jefferson saw the embargo as a test of his system and for this reason he was determined not to see it falter, as failure would invalidate the theory that had been at the heart of his military policy since the 1790s.

The theory ultimately did prove to be a failure, although acknowledgement of that painful truth was left to Madison, who succeeded Jefferson as president in 1809. The embargo was lifted the day Madison took office. Yet, Madison did not completely abandon the experiment in economic coercion. For the next two years, his administration attempted several variations on the retaliatory theme, first cutting off trade with just Britain and France and then restoring trade with both but promising to break off trade relations with one nation if the other lifted its edicts on neutral commerce. Over the same time period, the nation’s naval policy was allowed to drift. Although at the time of Jefferson’s retirement, the navy was about 80 gunboats shy of the 257 he had calculated were needed to defend the Atlantic and Gulf coastlines, the outgoing president himself called a halt to further construction. The moratorium on new construction was extended to all classes of vessels. In early 1809, the U.S. frigates also started patrolling the nation’s territorial waters in a measure that was pushed through Congress by Republican militants who were frustrated with the administration’s continued reliance on economic coercion for settling its problems with Britain. But Madison himself showed little interest in changing the status quo. The navy merited the barest of mentions in his inaugural address and his first two annual messages to Congress. The service's stock of political capital reached rock bottom in the spring of 1810 when the House of Representatives actually considered a resolution to sell off all of the nation's naval assets
save for three frigates. Although this measure received little support, Congress did come close to approving a reduction in navy manpower that would have left most of the fleet high-and-dry in port.  

By the spring of 1811, relations with Great Britain had entered an acute phase. A clash between the frigate President and the Royal Navy sloop Little Belt off the American coast in May deepened Madison’s sense of pessimism that war with Britain was unavoidable barring an eleventh hour change in London’s policies. In this sense, then, Jefferson’s system had led to the worst possible result. Instead of averting conflict, it escalated the confrontation with Britain and increased the likelihood that war would be the end result. At the same time, the American government’s self-imposed restrictions on trade also cut into its primary source of revenue. Steep reductions in the volume of imports led to a corresponding decrease in the duties collected by American custom officers between 1808 and 1811. As a result, the surplus the treasury was running in 1806 turned into a deficit just a few years later, forcing the government to borrow money to cover its expenses in 1809. Thus, at the very moment when war was most likely, the government lacked the financial resources to prepare the nation for the onset of hostilities.

In the end, Jefferson made the mistake of pursuing three incompatible policies. He adopted a very aggressive foreign policy coupled with a minimalist military policy and a very conservative economic policy. The conjunction of these policies brought the United States to the brink of war with Britain by the summer of 1811 while depleting the government’s war chest and leaving both the army and the navy ill-prepared for the impending conflict.

The phrase “peaceable coercion” or “coercions” crops up in numerous Jefferson letters. His earliest use of this phrase appears to be in a letter to George Logan, March 21, 1801, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Julian Boyd, et al., eds. (Princeton, 1950- ), 33:390. However, during the confrontation with Britain in 1793-94, he did employ the adjective “peaceable” to describe the retaliatory commercial legislation he hoped Congress would adopt. See Jefferson to George Washington, December 2, 1793, to Enoch Edwards, December 20, 1793, ibid., 27:607, 637..


As he explained to Pinckney in 1797, if commercial regulations were rigorously applied, then “justice from other nations shall be [the] mechanical result.” See *Papers of Jefferson*, 29:405.


Jefferson to Gerry, January 26, 1799, ibid., 30:645-50.

Shortly after his inauguration, Jefferson wrote a similar letter to Henry Knox, contrasting the views of incorrigible Federalists who were “making more noise for a great naval establishment” with those of genuine “patriots” (i.e. Republicans) who “wish it on a rational scale only, commensurate to our wants and needs.” See Jefferson to Knox, March 27, 1801, *Jefferson’s Works*, 10:246.

For Jefferson and Gallatin’s mutual antipathy towards the public debt and their commitment to paying it off completely during the early 1800s, see Herbert E. Sloan, *Principle and Interest: Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Debt* (New York, 1995) in general and chapters five and six in particular. For evidence of the importance that the party rank and file attached to the reduction of the debt, see the letters written by
Republican Congressmen between the years 1801 and 1812 in *Circular Letters of Congressmen to Their Constituents, 1789-1829*, Noble E. Cunningham, Jr., ed. (Chapel Hill, 1978), vols. 1 and 2.


13 See Chapter 3, note 30.


15 Robert Smith to Samuel Mitchell, January 20, 1802, Mitchell to the House of Representatives, March 10, 1802, *ASP:NA*, 84-86. It is not clear from his letter that Smith deliberately intended to dissuade Mitchell’s committee from recommending the sale of one or more yards, but his report certainly had that effect. For some of the improvements in the yards recommended by navy personnel, see Daniel Ludlow to Smith, March 17, 1802, George Harrison to Smith, March 17, 1802, Sameul Brown to Smith, April 6, 1802, Woodbury Langdon to Smith, April 7, 1802, *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers*, Dudley W. Knox, ed. (Washington, 1939-45) 2:88-90, 106-10.

16 The phrase in quotes is from Jefferson’s inaugural address. See note 1 above. For a nuanced analysis of Jeffersonian views on the militia and standing armies in the early national period, see Lawrence D. Cress, *Citizens in Arms: The Army and the Militia in American Society to the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill, 1982), 129-77. See also Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Beginnings of the Military Establishment in America* (New York, 1975), 300-03. As both Cress and Kohn observe, Republican leaders in the 1790s accepted the necessity of maintaining a standing force of regular soldiers so long as these troops were required for legitimate reasons of national defense. Kohn also notes that “Jefferson’s administration left the Federalist military edifice essentially untouched.”

made to the size and composition of the officer corps and army general staff. The Peace Act resulted in the dismissal of eighty-eight out of 230 officers. Jefferson took advantage of the reduction to purge the army of those men whose staunch Federalist loyalties rendered them politically suspect to the Republican administration. A no less important part of the act was the creation of a national military academy at West Point. According to Crackel, Jefferson expected the school to educate young Republicans in the military arts, thus ensuring that there would be a steady supply of officers with the proper political credentials far into the future.

18 Jefferson to Kosciusko, April 2, 1802, Jefferson’s Works, 10:309-10.

19 For an account of the Congressional proceedings that resulted in the bowdlerized militia bill of 1792, see the chapter entitled “The Murder of the Militia System” in Kohn, Eagle and Sword, 128-138. Kohn argues that Congress’s failure to devise an effective militia system left American leaders with little choice but to entrust the nation’s security to a national military establishment.


21 The territorial boundaries of America in 1800 enclosed an area amounting to a little under 900,000 square miles. The Lousiana Purchase added approximately another 800,000 square miles to this total. The figures are from U.S. Bureau of the Census, Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957 (Washington, 1960), 8.

22 Largest meaning as measured by population. For the purposes of this tabulation, the Southwark district and Northern Liberties township in Pennsylvania were counted as part of Philadelphia, although these locales were listed separately in the census data and were not formally annexed by Philadelphia until 1854. See Campbell Gibson, Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790 to 1990, Population Division Working Paper No. 27 (Washington, 1998).

23 For the importance of the seaports to the American economy in colonial times, see Richard Buel, Jr., In Irons: Britain’s Naval Supremacy and the American Revolutionary Economy (New Haven, 1998), 107-133. As Buel demonstrates in his meticulously-researched study, the loss or blockade of the principal American ports during the Revolution not only severely disrupted trade, but also undermined Congress’s efforts to finance the war. For the continued centrality of the coastal entrepots after the Revolution, see Curtis P. Nettels, The Emergence of a National Economy: 1775-1815 (New York, 1962), 301-08.

24 The most detailed account of the First System of coastal defense can be found in Arthur P. Wade, "Artillerists and Engineers: The Beginnings of American Seacoast

25 Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1:319.


27 Jefferson to Aaron Burr, November 18, 1801, Jefferson’s Writings, 8:102-03.

28 The best account of the crisis caused by the retrocession of Louisiana remains Arthur P. Whitaker, The Mississippi Question 1795-1803” A Study in Trade, Politics, and Diplomacy (Gloucester, 1962; originally published 1934), 176-236.

29 Jefferson to Robert Livingston, April 18, 1802, Jefferson’s Writings, 8:144-45.

30 Smith to Samuel Baron, February 24, 1803; to George Harrison, March 17, 1803; to Harrison, March 19, 1803, to William Bainbridge, March 17, 1803, Naval Documents Related to Barbary Powers, 2:366, 374-376.

31 The administration’s interest in creating a gunboat flotilla on the Mississippi may have been influenced by the fact that Spain maintained its own squadron of armed river vessels at New Orleans. See Whitaker, Mississippi Question, 35, 228.

32 Smith to Harrison, March 17, 1803, Naval Documents Related to Barbary Powers, 2:374. Smith’s unhurried attitude in this and the other letters cited in note 28 above contrast starkly with the urgent tone of his letters relating to the construction of the light warships intended for employment in the Mediterranean. See Smith to William Bainbridge, March 21 and 26, 1803; to Daniel Bedinger, March 26, 1803; to John Stricker, ibid., 2:376-378.


34 Christopher McKee, Edward Preble: A Naval Biography, 1761-1807 (Annapolis, 1972), 316.

35 Smith to John Rodgers, December 21, 1803; to James Barron, December 21, 1803, Naval Documents Related to Barbary Powers, 3:282-283.


40 Ibid., 62, 175-76. For a list of impressments that occurred close to the American coast in the first six months of the war, see “Abstract of impressments of seamen belonging to American vessels,” Jefferson to Congress, December 5, 1803, American State Papers: Foreign Relations (Washington, D.C., 1832-1834), 2:593-95. For references to specific incidents of impressment during the summer, see Thomas Newton, Jr. to Madison, July 30, 1803; William Davies to Madison, August 24, 1803, The Papers of James Madison: Secretary of State Series, Robert J. Brugger, et al., eds. (Charlottesville, 1986-), 5:254-55, 338-39.


42 Madison to Monroe, December 26, 1803, ibid., 6:213.


44 For the differences between the Senate and House versions of the bill and the fate of the proposed act, see note 6, Madison to Monroe, December 26, 1803, 6:215-16.


46 Jefferson to Smith, June 1, 1804, Jefferson Papers, reel 49.


48 Jefferson to Smith, July 4, 1804, Jefferson Papers, reel 49. See also Jefferson to Jacob Crowninshield, July 21, 1804, ibid.
Ibid. 

Jefferson to Smith, September 6, 1804, ibid., reel 50.


Jefferson to Nicholas, December 6, 1804, Jefferson’s Works, 10:124.


Gallatin to Jefferson, October 29, 1804, Jefferson’s Writings, 8:323-327.

Jefferson to Clinton, January 29, 1805, Jefferson Papers, reel 51. Jefferson’s recollection of the report’s particulars differs somewhat from his original discussion of its details in 1801. See note 27 above.

Gene Smith sees the gunboats in a similar light, although he claims that the defensive scheme favored by Jefferson also included ships-of-the-line and frigates. The policies pursued by Jefferson in the second term of his presidency, however, directly contradict this part of Smith’s argument. See “For the Purposes of Defense,” 6-21.


Smith, “For the Purposes of Defense,” 33-34.

Extracts from their letters were also included as part of a later package of information submitted to Congress by Jefferson. See ASP:NA, 1: 163-64.

For Gallatin’s general distaste for all things naval, see Alexander S. Balinky, "Albert Gallatin, Naval Foe," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 82 (July 1958): 293-304.


Gallatin to Jefferson, September 12, 1805, Gallatin’s Writings, 1:241-54. He wrote a similar albeit shorter letter a month earlier to Madison. See Gallatin to Madison, August 6, 1805, ibid., 1:238.


As Henry Adams and others have suggested. See Adams, *History of the United States during the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison*, 1:676, 681.


Jefferson to Smith, April 22, May 19, 1806, Jefferson Papers, reels 57 and 58.


Eight of the thirteen Republicans who voted in favor of the resolution on ships-of-the-line were from New York. For background on the Clintonians and their political beliefs, see Steven E. Siry, "The Sectional Politics of 'Practical Republicanism': De Witt Clinton's Presidential Bid, 1810-1812," *Journal of the Early Republic* 5 (Winter 1985): 441-449.


Circular Letter of James M. Garnett, February 25, 1809, ibid., 2:635.


Joshiah Goddard, quoted in Henrich, "Triumph of Ideology."


December 8, 1806 *National Intelligencer*. For further examples of his attacks on the navy, see his editorials of May 28, 1804 and December 1, 1806.


83 Gallatin outlined his ideas on strategy in a lengthy memorandum prepared for Jefferson just before the meeting with cabinet. See Gallatin to Jefferson, June 25, 1807, Writings of Gallatin, 1:340-353.

84 In addition to the frigates, the navy had one ship, four brigs, and three schooners on its rolls. See Robert Smith to Thomas Blount, November 16, 1807, ASP:NA, 1:168-169.


86 Entry for October 22, 1807, Anas of Jefferson, 261-62. For Jefferson’s disenchantment with the sailing navy and the tremendous stock he placed in the ability of gunboats to repel incursions by regular warships, see his letters to Dupont De Nemours, July 14, 1807, Thomas Paine, September 16, 1807, to William H. Cabell, October 25, November 1, 1807, Jefferson’s Works, 11:274-76 362-63, 384-85; to John W. Eppes, July 12, 1807, Jefferson’s Writings, 9:107-09.

87 Samuel Smith to Gallatin, July 26, 1807, Jefferson Papers, LC, reel 63. Gallatin agreed completely. See Gallatin to Jefferson, October 21, 1807, Writings of Gallatin, 1:360.


89 Jefferson to General John Mason, [undated but probably December 1807], Jefferson’s Works, 11:401-02.

90 The discussion of the differences between an embargo and commercial sanctions borrows liberally from Burton Spivak, Jefferson’s English Crisis: Commerce, Embargo, and the Republican Revolution (Charlottesville, 1979), especially 102-36.


Jefferson told Congress that the remainder of the gunboats authorized by the legislature could always be built on short notice when required.

For the actions of the militants, see Reginald C. Stuart, "James Madison and the Militants: Republican Disunity and Replacing the Embargo." Diplomatic History 6 (Spring 1982): 145-67. However, Stuart places too much emphasis on the dissident Republicans in the House and misses the fact that they were largely reacting to measures introduced by the so-called Invisibles in the Senate.

CHAPTER 5

THE NAVAL POLICY DEBATE ON THE EVE OF THE WAR OF 1812

The exchange of gunfire between the President and the Royal Navy sloop Little Belt off the American coast in May 1811 helped revive the navy's flagging image, but it otherwise cast a pall over the administration’s efforts to settle its differences with Great Britain by diplomatic means. The brief, one-sided battle left 32 British sailors dead or wounded and only served to inflame public opinion on both sides of the Atlantic. Fear of British reprisals contributed to a war scare that gripped the country in late August. Word reached Washington that a squadron of four ships-of-the-line and two frigates under Rear Admiral Sir Joseph Yorke was preparing to sail from England to take up station in American waters. In the end, the squadron turned out to be bound for a different destination. Nonetheless, tensions along the American seaboard remained high. As a precaution, Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton order detachments of gunboats to be mobilized at New York, Norfolk, and Wilmington, North Carolina. The gunboats joined the four American frigates and eight small warships already in service along the coast.

While Americans braced for a British response to the Little Belt incident, James Madison was coming to the conclusion that negotiations with the British were at an impasse. Shortly before he departed Washington at the end of July, Madison issued a
public statement ordering Congress to assemble on November 4th, a month ahead of schedule. Madison's pronouncement sent shivers of anticipation and anxiety running down the spine of the country. "Never did the American Congress assemble under circumstances of greater interest and responsibility," declared the Boston Independent Chronicle, a Republican newspaper. The early summons of Congress signaled that something important was afoot, possibly a major change in the administration's program of negotiation and commercial sanctions that had been the basis of Republican foreign policy since 1805. Yet the Federalist editor of the New York Evening Post probably spoke for many Americans of both political persuasions when he admitted to his readers that "What we are to look for, no one ventures to conjecture."

Even as Americans looked ahead nervously toward the start of the 12th Congress, however, their attention was also drawn in another direction, toward the ten frigates and handful of smaller vessels that comprised the United States Navy. The navy was a subject at once closely related to and yet curiously removed from the two issues that had brought the United States and Great Britain to loggerheads--impressment and neutral trading rights. Twice before in its brief history, the navy had been committed to battle to defend American sailors and commercial interests, first against the French in the West Indies and then against Tripoli in the Mediterranean. But since 1805, the navy had been left floating in a kind of limbo, confined to patrolling the nation's territorial waters but with its exact role or mission in any military struggle with Britain undefined.

The fall of 1811, however, brought the long-neglected question of what to do with the navy back to the forefront. The sense that war with Britain might very well be imminent set in motion a prolonged debate over American naval policy. The debate
occurred in two phases. It began in the pages of the nation's newspapers in September and then continued in Congress through the following spring. It constituted in its entirety the most sustained discussion of the navy and its role in national defense since the Republicans had assumed the reins of government in 1801. At stake was the service's immediate future as well as its long-term prospects.

The navy did not fare well in either stage of the debate. In the press, Republican writers and editors from every part of the country denounced suggestions to enlarge the fleet by building ships-of-the-line and new frigates. Proposals to augment the navy met with a similar response from Republicans in Congress. A fierce, two-week debate in the House of Representatives ended with Republican legislators spurning even a moderate increase in the American fleet. The Senate likewise rejected all proposals for building new warships. Historians have generally viewed these proceedings as simply reconfirming the Republican Party’s long-standing opposition to the creation of a large, permanent battlefleet— an aversion that was most pronounced among Republicans from the agrarian states of the South and West. But that view is not correct. Despite the outcome of the voting, the 12th Congress marked a significant point of departure from previous sessions of Congress. Prior to 1812, the battle for increasing the navy had been waged primarily by the Federalists, backed by a handful of Republican mavericks from the northern states. The 12th Congress, however, saw the emergence of a large and influential bloc of Republican legislators who readily took the lead in the fight for a stronger navy. For the most part young and intensely nationalistic, these delegates rejected the received wisdom of their Republican brethren and ardently championed plans
to expand the American fleet. Furthermore, this faction drew a large share of its strength from the very region that had, historically, been most hostile to the navy, the South.

This pro-navy contingent counted among its members some of the most prominent and powerful Republicans in Congress, including Henry Clay, John Calhoun, and Langdon Cheves, men who would occupy many of the key leadership positions in Congress for the duration of the war. While Clay and his cohorts failed to attract sufficient converts to their cause in the winter of 1811-12, they still marshaled enough votes to secure one important concession from the rest of the party--an agreement to acquire timber and other materials as a prelude to future construction. More importantly, they also provided the navy with something it had conspicuously lacked to date--a solid nucleus of supporters within the Republican party who spoke to a fairly broad constituency. Although their bid for expansion proved premature in 1812, their uncompromising efforts on behalf of the navy during the 12th Congress represented the first critical steps in forging a new national consensus on the navy free from the taint of party politics or ideology.

* * *

The press eagerly reshared the details of President's engagement with the Little Belt in May 1811 for months afterward. However, the incident inspired little discussion of the overall direction of American naval policy. The event that actually set the debate over the navy in motion was the publication of a short editorial in the administration's semi-official mouthpiece, the Washington National Intelligencer. "Shall the United States complete and maintain a Navy?" the Intelligencer asked in its September 10, 1811 issue. The paper acknowledged that the navy was clearly inadequate to the task of
defending the seaboard against the British— it lacked the firepower to fend off even the "petty [British] squadron" currently hovering off of American shores, let alone the six Royal Navy vessels under Admiral Yorke believed to be bearing down on the coast. "If we are to have a Navy," the editorial declared, "in the name of our country's honor let it be placed on a more respectable footing."\(^{10}\) Having set the issue squarely before its readers, however, the *Intelligencer* took pains to avow its own neutrality: "On the Navy Question it is not our purpose to express an opinion; but to impress on our readers and brother editors the necessity of preparing their own minds and that of their representatives for a decision of a question, to which their attention cannot but have been impressively called by the scenes lately and now passing on our coast."

The column was the handiwork of *Intelligencer* editor Joseph Gales, Jr. However, the inspiration if not the idea for the piece almost certainly came from Secretary of State James Monroe, who had replaced Robert Smith in the post earlier in the year. Gales on a number of occasions based his editorials on suggestions or opinions voiced by members of the executive branch, and Monroe served as his main liaison with the administration.\(^{11}\) As negotiations with British Minister Augustus J. Foster turned sour in the summer of 1811, Monroe met with Gales periodically to ensure that the *Intelligencer* understood the government's position. During these and later discussions, Monroe made it a point to impress upon Gales the president's determination to force the issue with Britain even at the risk of war. Years afterward, Gales credited his conversations with the Secretary of State as having had a powerful influence on the tenor and content of the *Intelligencer's* editorials prior to the war.\(^{12}\)
How Monroe and Madison were inclined to handle the navy question cannot be answered with any real precision, but the editorial holds some important clues to their thinking. The statement "If we are to have a Navy . . . let it be placed on a more respectable footing" by itself represented a major admission on the administration's part, for it clearly implied that a big buildup of the navy would be agreeable to the president. That the editorial went on to disclaim any opinion on the subject suggests not so much uncertainty or indecision within the executive department as it does simple caution. Certainly, this was the way many observers read the Intelligencer's remarks. Reporting back to his superiors in Paris, Louis Serurier, the French Minister to the United States, maintained that "the opinion of the Executive Power is not in doubt. It wants a navy, but it wants it on a larger scale than it is today." But the administration also wanted to avoid antagonizing its Republican constituents, Serurier went on to say, which explained why "it submits the proposition to them in this questioning and deferential form." The New York Evening Post, a Federalist paper, echoed Serurier's assessment. The administration was using the editorial, the Post said, to take the people's pulse before submitting any sort of recommendation to Congress.

Madison had good reason for wanting to step gingerly around the subject of the navy. He had inherited from Jefferson a badly divided party, and in the two-and-a-half years since his inauguration as president the cracks had widened further. If his call to arms was to make any impression on London, Madison knew that the Republicans needed to present a united front. Thus, he could ill-afford to take any steps that might intensify the intra-party squabbling at this critical juncture. Circumspection was clearly called for, and all the more so because from the administration's point-of-view, an
expanded navy was not essential to its plans for prosecuting the war. In the event of war, the administration counted on making Canada the decisive theater; whatever happened at sea would be of secondary importance. In the final analysis, then, the Intelligencer editorial provided a fairly clear indication of Madison's priorities: a large naval force was acceptable and even desirable but by no means did the administration consider such a fleet to be indispensable to its goals.

The editorial served its intended purpose, touching off a national referendum on the navy. The debate, however, was largely limited to Republican circles. Federalist editors, while taking note of the Intelligencer's remarks, declined to participate in the general discussion. Their reticence no doubt stemmed from their awareness that the Republicans were unlikely to pay attention to anything the opposition press had to say anyway. They also remained silent because from their perspective there was nothing to discuss--they had loudly and consistently clamored for a strong navy since the 1790s. Instead, Federalist papers were content to treat the administration's sudden interest in naval affairs as simply another example of Republican cupidity. The very men who allowed the navy to rot, the Charleston Courier proclaimed, "are now whining for the want of it." The Philadelphia United States' Gazette went further, advising its readers that all of the talk about increasing the navy was nothing more than a government ruse. The Gazette avowed that the administration's real purpose in dangling the prospects of an expanded fleet in front of the Republicans was to frighten the party faithful into supporting yet another embargo.

In the Republican press, the Intelligencer's query received a much more friendly, serious, and thorough hearing. Most Republican newspapers of consequence responded
to the editorial, in some cases at considerable length. The Boston *Independent Chronicle*, for instance, published a six-part series on the subject. In addition to offering their own observations, editors regularly printed bits and pieces of commentary culled from other papers around the country. The reaction was particularly heated in the Northeast, where the *Chronicle*, the Boston *Patriot*, and others engaged in a running dialogue on the benefits and dangers of naval expansion. Responses tended to fall at one or the other extreme: writers either wholeheartedly embraced the idea of increasing the navy or roundly condemned it. The highly polarized character of the debate, however, made its outcome all the more plain to see. By the time the arguments died down in December, the balance of public opinion had tilted decisively against the navy.

Overall, only a handful of writers ventured to speak out in favor of increasing the navy. The *Intelligencer* printed several positive letters, with the Boston *Patriot* waging perhaps the most sustained campaign on the service's behalf. In presenting their case for expansion, navy proponents repeatedly stressed one basic theme: only a large navy could protect the nation's extensive foreign commerce. A close corollary to this argument was the idea that commerce was worth defending. A letter in the September 26 *Intelligencer* by a writer identifying himself as "Vindex" elaborated on this subject in very eloquent terms. The freedom to find a market for the country's agricultural surplus and manufacturing goods was a fundamental right, Vindex claimed: "Nature herself seems to have contemplated a union of mankind in a commercial intercourse." Therefore, to allow another nation to infringe upon this right represented an intolerable affront, "a surrender of that independence which Nature acknowledges." Vindex's letter gained added force from a column by editor Gales that directly preceded it. This editorial, by far the most
militant pronouncement to appear in the Intelligencer for some time, denounced in scathing terms British abuses against American trade. "All temporizing must cease," the Intelligencer insisted. "Commerce must either be abandoned or fought for." Gales ended with a declaration of confidence that his countrymen would choose the honorable alternative.18

But Vindex, Gales, and the other writers and editors who saw value in a navy were expressing a minority opinion. From newspapers in every part of the country came a torrent of criticism that left no doubt as to where the majority of Republican commentators stood on the navy question. Opponents of naval expansion insisted that it would be futile to attempt to build a fleet powerful enough to contend with the Royal Navy. They argued that such a naval force would take too long to complete and would be prohibitively expensive.19 The United States would not be in a position to construct a first-class navy for at least a century, the New York Morning Post opined.

Detractors also stressed the dangers to civil liberties posed by the need to find sufficient sailors to man a large navy. The service's increased manpower requirements could only be met by resorting to the practice of impressment, numerous papers predicted.20 The Chronicle took even more alarmist position, warning that a sizeable navy would depopulate the country as well as corrupt the nation's citizenry by exposing them to the debaucheries of maritime life.21

The immense strength of the Royal Navy and its matchless record in battle were frequently cited as further reasons why it would be foolish to engage in a naval competition with Britain. The Baltimore Whig produced some sobering statistics from Steele's List attesting to this fact: Of the thousand-plus warships in the British navy, 207
were prizes taken from other nations. "Now if we had 100 ships of the line," the Whig wondered, "how long could we retain them?" The Whig's sentiments were shared by many other papers. The Trenton True-American summed up the prevailing mood when it caustically noted that Congress should dub any bill to build new ships "An act to augment the British Navy at the expense of the United States." Given the dubious advantage of a large navy, a few Republican editors ventured that the United States would be better off abandoning foreign commerce altogether and instead concentrate on agriculture and domestic manufacture as the key to economic self-sufficiency. But most pundits believed that American commercial interests should and could be defended against foreign predators. The key, they argued, was attacking Britain where it was weakest: on land. Britain might rule the waves, but the Americans could claim special dominion over the land, the Chronicle was moved to declare. As the British had learned to their misfortune during the Revolutionary War, the country's fertile fields and valleys were a wellspring of national strength--"One Bunker-hill was more formidable than 20 ships of the line." A parody of the famous song "Ye Mariners of England" that was making the rounds of Republican papers in early 1812 reinforced this vision of an American fortitude rooted in the elemental power of the land:

Columbia fears no enemy
That plows the briny main,
Her home's a might continent,
Its soil her rich domain!

A nation of such expansive territorial dimensions as the United States had little to fear from a naval power like Great Britain. But the same did not hold true in reverse. Canada beckoned, as more than one Republican writer pointed out.
somewhat coyly observed that despite Britain's naval superiority, "we can give her vital blows in another way." The National Aegis was more explicit: if war became unavoidable, then let the United States show its "military spirit" by seizing Canada.\textsuperscript{27}

A war prosecuted on land thus promised to redound to American advantage, while a war waged at sea portended only disaster, so the majority of Republican commentators argued. But this did not mean they believed that the United States should abandon the oceans altogether in the event of open hostilities with Britain. Rather than squandering millions of government dollars on a navy, the administration should rely on independent enterprise to carry the war forward into the sea lanes. Swarms of privateers issuing out of American ports could exact a serious toll on British commerce worldwide, the National Aegis and many others contended. The nation's experiences during the Revolution clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of this mode of warfare.\textsuperscript{28} And while privateering vessels ravaged British shipping at all points overseas, gunboats and forts could supply ample protection against enemy depredations at home. Never one to temper its opinions with level-headed judgement, the Chronicle waxed particularly enthusiastic about the country's fleet of gunboats. There was something in the psychology of British naval officers that rendered them supremely fearful of the unexpected, the Chronicle explained. And the gunboats, with their ability to descend suddenly on the enemy at any time during the day or night, were ideally suited to exploit this peculiar national character trait. "A few strong, well manned gunboats . . . would become more terrific to a British squadron lying within our harbors, than twenty frigates," the paper confidently claimed.\textsuperscript{29} The Chronicle appeared to be alone in espousing this particular theory; far more persuasive, however, was its basic assertion that gunboats and coastal installations represented a
much sounder investment of the nation's resources than a speculative venture like a seagoing navy.

By the fall of 1811, the question of naval expansion remained as highly politicized as ever. As far as most Republicans were concerned, building a big fleet was a purely Federalist conceit, and more than a few balked at endorsing a policy they identified so closely with their opponents. As the Chronicle explained, "It is generally observed, that the best mode for the republicans to adopt is, to approve of whatever the federalists condemn and disapprove of whatever they applaud. Nine times out of ten this will be found the most correct decision." An anonymous writer in the Kentucky Argus registered his protest very succinctly, signing off his letter under the name "No Federalist." The Federalists for their part viewed the navy question in the same partisan terms, and they derived no small amount of pleasure from baiting their political enemies. "And is it possible that so rank a Federalist measure can be countenanced by Democrats?" asked the Frankfort American Republic in mock amazement. The Republic's skepticism proved to be well-found--Republican commentators found it difficult to swallow such a politically distasteful design. Instead, they treated the Federalists' support for a strong navy as another reason why expansion should be rejected. "These men are sensible that we are invincible on the land, and therefore wish to entice us on the ocean," the Chronicle warned. The Lexington Reporter also saw a sinister purpose behind the opposition's desire to strengthen the navy. A big naval establishment would lead to heavy taxes and would fall easily into British hands once war commenced. "But why should republicans advocate the building [of] a navy?" the paper wanted to know. The answer turned out to be that there was none. "The building of a
navy at the present time we think would be the most foolish project that could be 
devised," the Reporter concluded.32

In elaborating on why they were so completely opposed to a large navy, 
Republican writers employed many of the same ideological arguments that had been 
voiced in the 1790s. A large navy would swallow up American resources and plunge the 
nation into debt, the Trenton True-American maintained. It would also embroil the 
United States in perpetual wars, the Argus claimed.33 For the Reporter, the notion of 
building a big fleet seemed like a return to the discredited Federalist program of the 
previous decade. The advocates of the old system are already very busy, the paper 
declared: standing armies, navies, and excise laws are urged on the nation, while places, 
offices, pensions, jobs, and contracts are "gaped after."34 As evidence of the dangers 
posed by a big, expensive navy, critics pointed to the unhappy fate that had befallen 
Britain. The navy and its attendant evils--press gangs, profiteering, debilitating taxes, 
and the like--had corrupted the character of Britain's citizens and government. Witness 
the example of Britain, the Argus warned, "a nation once characterized for her honor and 
her love of liberty, but now bereaved of her liberty, stript of her honor, and engaged in 
murders, piracies, and bloodsheds of the most inhuman nature."35 The thrust of these 
arguments was clear. Not only was it imprudent to build a big navy at the present time, 
but it was also highly improvident under any circumstances.

Although the newspaper war was still raging when Madison returned to 
Washington in October, the Intelligencer's editorial had already raised enough of a public 
outcry for the president to discern the general direction of the debate. The degree to 
which the loud protests against naval expansion influenced his thinking can only be
judged by inference, as his writings provide no hint as to how he viewed the whole furor. But his subsequent behavior strongly suggests that the angry reaction in the press doused whatever enthusiasm he had for strengthening the navy. If Madison had been entertaining the idea of placing the navy "on a more respectable footing" back in September, he showed no interest in pursuing such a policy when he delivered his annual address to Congress in November.

In the message, Madison outlined a comprehensive plan to improve the nation's military posture on land. But he refrained from saying anything specific about the navy other than recommending the stockpiling of timber. Indeed, between the convening of Congress in November, 1811, and the declaration of war the following June, Madison did not utter a single public recorded remark on the subject of naval expansion. Neither did Secretary of State Monroe. Monroe might privately express his disappointment when the House of Representatives rejected a provision to build additional frigates in January, 1812. But over the course of his many meetings and communications with members of Congress, there is no evidence he ever indicated that the administration was in any way dissatisfied with the current size of the navy. Finally, the *National Intelligencer* also maintained a discreet silence. Although the *Intelligencer* continued to exhort the nation to gird itself for war, Gales never breathed another word about strengthening the navy. As far as the administration was concerned, naval expansion was a dead issue.

If the furious debate in the press acted as one check on the administration's naval ambitions, the counsel of Madison's most trusted cabinet officer, Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin, provided another. In the fall of 1811, with war looming just over the horizon, Gallatin mounted one final effort to keep his financial program from coming
totally unraveled. Commenting on a draft of Madison's message to Congress, Gallatin made it clear that he still favored economic coercion over military conflict. But if war was necessary, Gallatin advised the president to proceed carefully. "Having alluded to our limited resources, it may be added that any misapplication of these would be fatal," he warned. Gallatin conceded that appropriations for the army would have to be increased and that the war would have to be financed through loans. But the navy was another matter. Money for the navy would have to come at the expense of the army or would entail additional borrowing at a more disadvantageous rate, Gallatin argued. He strongly advised against either option. Even maintaining the service at its current level of appropriations would weaken the war effort: "Unless therefore a great utility can be proven, the employment of that force will be a substantial evil." Instead of wasting precious millions on the navy, Gallatin concluded, the nation should rely on the "spirit and enterprize" of its citizens to prosecute the war at sea.\(^{38}\)

In short, Gallatin was advising the president to take the entire fleet and place it in mothballs for the duration of the war. It is highly unlikely that Madison seriously contemplated taking such a drastic step. At the very least, laying up the navy in this fashion would have produced howls of protest from the coastal cities and towns. It would have also severely compromised the message of determination that Madison wanted to send to Britain. But although he never said so in so many words, Madison more or less by default accepted Gallatin's notion that the war at sea could be waged most effectively--and cheaply--by privateers. The idea that this was to be a war waged at public expense on land and at private expense at sea was implicit in the administration's efforts to prepare the United States for conflict. Once war was declared, a mixed force of regulars...
and volunteers would descend on Canada, while privately owned vessels carrying letters of marque and reprisal would launch a global offensive against British shipping. Some use would also be found for the navy in its present form, but the administration made almost no effort to explain what this mission would be.

Students of the War of 1812 have lavished almost as much attention on the proceedings of the 12th Congress as they have on the conflict itself. The speeches and voting records of the Congressional delegates have been scrutinized by historians and political scientists alike in an effort to understanding the decision-making dynamics that produced the first declaration of war in the nation's history. Up until the early 1960s, scholars saw the main impetus for war coming from the small group of southern and western Republicans--the War Hawks--who pushed, prodded, and otherwise coaxed their more moderate colleagues and a weak-willed James Madison into taking belligerent action.

In the 1960s, Bradford Perkins, Reginald Horsman, Roger H. Brown, and Norman K. Risjord refined this thesis. While not discounting the importance of War Hawk leadership, these writers demonstrated that the declaration of war emerged out of a consensus that took shape along partisan lines, with the Federalists uniformly opposing the war and a majority of Republicans favoring it. In the mid-1970s, Ronald L. Hatzenbuehler succeeded in solidifying this partisan interpretation by using a variety of quantitative methods to show that voting on foreign policy issues adhered closely to party lines throughout the session. Around the same time, Hatzenbuehler and others began to pay closer attention to the role of executive leadership. Both J.C.A. Stagg and Rudolph M. Bell contend that Madison, often acting through Monroe, supplied the crucial
initiatives that set the Republican Congressional machinery in motion. Hatzenbuehler, however, provides the most persuasive argument, emphasizing that it was the cooperation between party leaders in Congress and the executive branch that turned out to be the decisive factor in the drive toward war.

The outcome of the debate over naval expansion in the House of Representatives lends credence to Hatzenbuehler's views by serving as the exception that proves the rule. For most of the session, Madison and the War Hawks acted in unison, mutually supporting each other's efforts to prepare the nation for war. But on the issue of increasing the navy, not only did the administration fail to provide any direction, but harmony within War Hawk ranks crumbled, too. More than any other factor, the inability of Madison and the Republican leaders to speak with a single voice on the subject of the navy brought about the defeat of the House bill to enlarge the American fleet.

Madison delivered his annual address to Congress on November 5, 1811, the day after the Capitol opened its doors for the new session. His message articulated at least part of the administration's vision for conducting the war, while implying the rest. It commenced with a recital of the country's most recent efforts to reach an amicable settlement with Great Britain. Despite being repeatedly furnished with proof that France had revoked its decrees affecting American trade, London continued to deny that any change in French policy had taken place. Far from relaxing their own commercial edicts, the British pledged to enforce their Orders in Council until English goods should be admitted onto the continent like any other nation's. About halfway through the message, Madison got to the main point. In light of Britain's intransigence, he declared, Congress should act immediately to put the United States "into an armor and an attitude demanded
by the crisis." In the very next line, he briefly described the measures that needed to be taken. He asked Congress to fill out the army to its authorized limit, recruit an auxiliary force of regulars, raise volunteers, and ready the militia for service. All of these proposals were obviously intended to prepare the nation for military operations on land.

When he turned to the navy, however, the clarity and directness that had distinguished the preceding paragraphs deserted him. Perhaps out of a desire to avoid angering either the navy's partisans or its opponents, Madison took refuge in ambiguity. "Your attention will, of course, be drawn to such provisions on the subject of our naval force as may be required for the services to which it may be best adapted," he said in a statement so loaded with conditionals as to be almost meaningless. On a more intelligible level, he added, "I submit to Congress the seasonableness also of an authority to augment the stock of such materials as are imperishable in their nature, or may not at once be attainable." If the sum of these two sentences left the administration's desires less than transparent, one conclusion did seem warranted: In no way could Madison's remarks be construed as a request for building additional warships.

The representatives and senators of the newly assembled 12th Congress who gathered to hear the president's speech formed an audience that was predominantly Republican in character. In the House of Representatives, Republicans outnumbered Federalists by a margin of 106 to 36. The distribution of seats in the upper chamber was equally lopsided, with Republicans accounting for 28 out of 34 senators. The substantial majorities enjoyed by the party in both houses of the national legislature, however, concealed a number of potentially serious divisions within its ranks. The appointment of Monroe as Secretary of State the previous spring had healed the last of
the rift between Madison and the Old Republicans--the states' rights, strict construction
conservatives from the South who had tried to place Monroe at the head of the 1808
Republican presidential ticket. But a few holdovers from the Old Republican schism
remained. Sometimes called the Quids, these dissidents refused to rejoin the Republican
fold, contending that Madison had strayed too far from the party's founding principles.

By the 12th Congress, the once-powerful leader of the Quids, Representative John
Randolph of Virginia, had lost most of his political leverage. Yet with his eccentric
mannerisms and shrill speaking voice, Randolph could still dominate the proceedings on
the floor of the House to a degree completely out of proportion to his actual influence.

The "Invisibles" and the Clintonians also posed a far greater threat to Republican unity.

While the Quids, Invisibles, and Clintonians collectively acted as a strong
centrifugal force in the 12th Congress, their pull was balanced by an equally powerful
centripetal force, the War Hawks. The label War Hawk was coined by the Federalists,
who applied it to the band of youthful Republican militants that directed the drive for
war. The War Hawks were less an organized faction than a spontaneous movement that
coaalesced during the first weeks of Congress around the charismatic Kentucky lawyer,
Henry Clay. Although Clay's prior Congressional experience amounted to having twice
served out partial terms when vacancies arose in the Senate, this limited exposure had
been enough to gain him a national reputation for his eloquent and fiery nationalism. At
the end of the 11th Congress, he had surrendered his seat in the upper chamber,
preferring the "turbulence" of the House to the "solemn stillness of the Senate Chamber."

Elected without opposition, the freshman Representative arrived in Washington shortly
before Congress convened and took up residence in a boarding house about a hundred yards from the Capitol.

There he was joined by five other Congressmen: fellow Kentuckian George Bibb, who was elected to fill Clay's place in the Senate; Representative Felix Grundy of Tennessee; and a trio of Representatives from South Carolina, John Calhoun, Langdon Cheves, and William Lowndes. Although they fell in together as much by accident as by design, this group came to form the nucleus of the War Hawk movement. In many respects, they were remarkably alike. All were young--Bibb and Cheves at age 35 were the seniors of the group, while the youngest, Lowndes and Calhoun, were both a year shy of their 30th birthdays. All were lawyers. And, finally, all were relative newcomers to Congress. But their youthfulness and inexperience were deceptive, as each of them had acquired considerable seasoning in the rough and tumble arena of state politics.50

The War Hawks and their allies seized the initiative immediately in Congress, securing Clay's election as Speaker of the House on the first day of the new session. Clay proceeded to use his authority as Speaker to good advantage. He packed the key House select committees with War Hawks and other representatives who could be counted on to recommend vigorous action, while paying only token attention to seniority. The most important of these was the select Committee on Foreign Relations, which was given the task of reviewing Madison's message and framing a response. Clay picked the members of the nine-man committee with care, assigning the chair to Peter B. Porter, a War Hawk from western New York, and the second and third seats to his messmates, Calhoun and Grundy. Two other militants, John Desha of Kentucky and John Harper of New Hampshire, also received spots on the committee, as did a pair of veteran Representatives
with solid records of loyalty to the administration, Ebenezer Seaver of Massachusetts and John Smilie of Pennsylvania.\footnote{51}

Porter and the others worked on their reply for a couple of weeks. Secretary of State Monroe participated in several of the meetings, where he described in more specific terms what the administration wanted in the way of military preparations. He also reassured the committee that Madison was committed to war if Britain refused to modify its policies come spring. "The Rubicon is pass'd," Felix Grundy wrote triumphantly to Andrew Jackson on November 28, 1811 after returning from a final planning session.\footnote{52} Earlier that day, Monroe had hastily reviewed a draft of the committee's report. Other than suggesting a few changes for the purposes of moderating the language, Monroe announced the administration to be in complete agreement with the measures the committee had proposed: "To the resolutions no objection whatsoever is entertained--they appear to be dictated by the crisis, and to apply to suitable objects."\footnote{53} With the administration's approval in hand, Porter delivered the report to the House the following day.

In many respects, the committee's report retraced the ground covered by Madison's annual address, although its overall tone was considerably more impassioned and belligerent. The report acknowledged that the nation's rights as a neutral had been trampled on by France as well as Britain. But France in 1810 had rescinded its decrees, while the British had carried on with their wanton actions, despoiling American commerce and seizing American seamen. Consequently, the "occasion is now presented when the national character, misunderstood and traduced for a time by foreign and domestic enemies, should be vindicated." The committee's reported ended with six
resolutions calling on Congress to fill out the ranks of the regular army to its authorized limit, recruit another 10,000 regulars, raise 50,000 volunteers, ready the militia for service, fit out the navy vessels currently in ordinary, and permit merchant ships to arm in self-defense.

The report stands as one of the most crucial documents produced during the 12th Congress. It took the general prescriptions contained in Madison's message and converted them into a concrete legislative agenda. Even more significant, though, was the round of debates that followed the reading of the report. In a succession of speeches supporting the committee's resolutions, the War Hawks worked to forge a consensus around their conception of why the war should be fought and how it could won.  

Regarding the first issue, they admitted few doubts: This was to be a war fought for the vindication of the nation's maritime rights. As John C. Calhoun put it, the question of war "is reduced to this single point--which shall we do, abandon or defend our own commercial and maritime rights, and the personal liberties of our citizens employed in exercising them? These rights are essentially attacked, and war is the only means of redress."  

As to how these rights were to be upheld in the face of Britain's overwhelming strength at sea, the War Hawks and their supporters were equally resolute. In a speech that at last made explicit all that had been hinted at or implied in Madison's annual message, Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Porter provided the essential outlines of the United States' military strategy. In the event of war, Britain would find itself assailed on two fronts. At sea, hundreds of American privateers would fall upon and devastate British commerce, Porter confidently predicted. And on land, the United States
would strike an even more decisive blow by seizing Canada. Canada's great value as a source of naval supplies and foodstuffs, Porter reminded his listeners, rendered these provinces "almost indispensable to the existence of Great Britain, cut off as she now is in a great measure from the north of Europe." In presenting this blueprint for war, Porter was quite adamant about another point: that no effort was to be made to augment the navy in any appreciable way. "That we can contend with Great Britain openly and even handed on the element where she injures us, it would be folly to pretend," he declared. "Were it even in our power to build a navy which should be able to cope with her, no man who has any regard for the happiness of the people of this country would venture to advise such a measure."  

During the two-week debate over the committee's resolutions, other militants chimed in their support for Porter's vision of how the war should be prosecuted. The War Hawks succeeded in making their case. The objections raised by Randolph and a handful of others were easily quashed by militant-minded Republicans, who argued that the failure of economic retaliation left no alternative but war or submission. Confronted with so stark a choice, even a conservative stalwart like Nathanial Macon of North Carolina was moved to stand up on the floor and publicly throw in his lot with the war party. The Federalists also declined to put up a fight. Tired of being branded as Anglophiles and treated as scapegoats for all of the ills that had befallen the country, Federalist leaders had urged party members to refrain from opposing the war measures. Thus, with Federalist compliance and the support of a majority of Republicans, the six resolutions submitted by the House Foreign Relations Committee easily passed by margins ranging from 97-22 to 120-8.
The navy figured little in these early deliberations. To the extent that the service was mentioned at all, it was by Republicans who echoed Porter's sentiments about the futility and the dangers of trying to contend with Britain at sea. But this would soon change. As the debate over the resolutions wound down, another House committee was preparing to deliver a report of a very different nature. A week after the president had presented his annual address, the House had voted to refer the part of his message dealing with the navy to a select Committee on Naval Affairs. As with the other House committees, the members were appointed by Speaker Clay, and he exercised his customary good judgment in selecting Representatives who would be friendly to the service. Two of the committee's seven seats went to Federalists--specifically, James Milnor of Pennsylvania and Josiah Quincy of Massachusetts--who as a rule could be trusted to support the navy under almost any circumstance. Clay gave two other seats to Republicans representing the leading commercial districts of the Chesapeake, Thomas Newton, Jr. of Norfolk, Virginia, and Alexander McKim of Baltimore, Maryland. And for the all-important chair, he tapped one of his own messmates, Langdon Cheves, who hailed from another major southern center of trade, Charleston, South Carolina.  

A product of the Carolina backcountry, the thirty-five year-old Cheves was a self-made man who had carved out a successful career for himself as a Charleston attorney and as a state politician. Like Clay, Cheves had served briefly in the 11th Congress and then been elected unopposed for the 12th. He was tall but thin with reddish hair and a complexion to match. He habitually conducted himself with an arrogant self-assurance and confidence born partly of his own resourcefulness, but also nurtured by the distinct Carolina political culture in which he was raised. State government in South Carolina
had been dominated since the Revolution by an entrenched lowcountry elite, giving rise to a generation of politicians who placed greater stock in their own perceptions of what constituted the public good than in dutiful adherence to any sort of party or majority line. The brand of Republicanism practiced in South Carolina also retained strong Federalist overtones, particularly in its conservatism and its healthy interest in commerce. Cheves' character was shaped by all of these influences. He was strong-willed, independent-minded, and outspoken almost to a fault.

As committee chair, Cheves had the responsibility of reporting back on the president's remarks about the naval establishment and drafting legislation to go along with the committee's recommendations. In carrying out these functions, Cheves sought the input of another Carolinian, Secretary of Navy Paul Hamilton. Hamilton had served a term as governor while Cheves was in the state legislature, so the two had at least a passing acquaintance with one another. Shortly after being assigned to the naval committee in mid-November, Cheves dispatched a letter to the Secretary requesting details on the current state of the navy and also soliciting his opinion on what sort of force would be adequate to protect the nation's seaports and coasting trade in time of war. In response to the second question, Hamilton maintained that twelve 74-gun ships-of-the-line and twenty frigates (including the ten the U.S. already possessed) would be quite sufficient to meet the security needs of the United States. Hamilton also urged Cheves to consider making an extra annual appropriation for the next three years that could be applied toward the purchase of seasoned timber. He blamed the frequent and costly overhauls required by some ships on the department's practice of using green timber for
repairs, due to shortages of seasoned wood. He threw in an additional plea about the need for a proper dry-dock, which would greatly facilitate the repair process.\textsuperscript{64}

Hamilton's letter was not the clarion call for naval expansion that historians sometimes make it out to be.\textsuperscript{65} Nowhere did he actually recommend that the country should attempt to construct a fleet along the lines he had described. The most he permitted himself to say on this subject was that cannon and a large share of the timber necessary to build six 74s were already on hand. But the Secretary's report provided Cheves with all of the encouragement he needed. On December 17, Cheves introduced "A bill concerning the naval establishment" into the House, along with a copy of Hamilton's statement. In a brief speech accompanying these documents, Cheves delivered what amounted to a glowing testimonial on behalf of the navy. Rebuking his fellow Republicans for their past neglect of the service, Cheves asserted that a strong naval force offered the cheapest, safest, and most economical means of securing the nation from foreign attack. He stopped short of saying that the United States should immediately undertake a full-scale building program: "[I]t will neither be politic nor practicable to swell the naval establishment of this country to the size of our desires or of our necessities."

Nonetheless, he also believed that the nation was fated to be a naval power. Accordingly, a gradual buildup of the fleet afforded Americans the best means of fulfilling this destiny. The bill itself sought appropriations for four basic provisions: repairing the five frigates in ordinary, purchasing a stock of timber, constructing a dry-dock, and building some new 38-gun frigates. In keeping with Congressional custom, the
bill did not specify the number of frigates that should be built. Cheves recommended ten.\(^66\)

Cheves’ speech delivered a clear message that not all Republicans subscribed to the party orthodoxy on naval affairs. While the bill was still pending, however, Republican solidarity began to unravel on other issues, too. The Invisibles in the Senate struck first. William Branch Giles, head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, preempted the House and won the upper chamber's approval for a far more ambitious expansion of the army. Instead of raising 10,000 additional regulars for three years as both the House and the administration desired, the Senate bill called for the recruitment of 25,000 for a five-year term of enlistment. Presented with this fait accompli, the House after much discussion and hand-wringing reluctantly went along with the Senate measure, although many Representatives frankly doubted that the country could muster such a force in the space of a few months.\(^67\)

The bill authorizing the president to raise a volunteer corps of 50,000 men also prompted considerable disagreement. This time, the main points of contention centered on who had the right to appoint the officers for the corps—the president or the states—and whether or not the volunteers could legally venture onto foreign soil. Since most of the volunteers would come from the state militias, many Republicans were loath to surrender too much control of these forces to the executive branch. The House eventually decided the officering issue in the president's favor, while leaving unresolved the Constitutional question concerning foreign employment of the volunteers.\(^68\)

These proceedings had two important implications for the upcoming naval bill. First, the acceptance of the expansive army legislation sponsored by Giles completely
changed the financial complexion of the Republicans' preparedness campaign. Now party members were facing the prospects of a war whose probable costs greatly exceeded their initial expectations. Second, the debate over the volunteer bill demonstrated that despite their willingness to countenance an unprecedented increase in the nation's armed forces, most Republicans were not ready to cast aside all of their ideological scruples about the military.

On January 17, 1812, the House finally took up the issue of the navy. Cheves opened the deliberations by speaking for two hours that afternoon and for several additional hours the following day. He began on a defiant note, acknowledging that what he had to say would not please many of those in his own party. Yet, he would not allow the "errors and prejudices" of his brethren in the House to dissuade him from speaking his conscience, all the more so because the future of the navy was a matter of grave importance to the nation. Cheves then struck a note that would be repeatedly sounded by advocates of naval expansion over the next two weeks: the interdependence of commerce and agriculture. The interests of the two were inseparable, Cheves argued: "Every facility of commerce increases the value of agricultural productions." Thus, the prosperity of the latter hinged upon the security of the former. "Without ships and seamen, and, consequently, without commerce, of what value would our agriculture be . . . ?” he asked.

There was nothing very radical in this assertion. Since the beginning of the 12th Congress, Republicans of all stripes, while disavowing any desire to preserve the carrying trade, regularly stressed their commitment to defend the rights of American producers to sell their surpluses abroad. But from here Cheves proceeded to speak what was
tantamount to heresy to many of his Republican colleagues. It was time, he said, to create a permanent naval establishment, not only to deal with the present crisis but to meet the demands of future emergencies as well. Lawyer that he was, Cheves promised that he would "prove" to the House that a navy could "cheaply and effectually" defend both commerce and the coastline. As evidence, he cited reams of numbers and dollar amounts to demonstrate that the naval force mentioned in Secretary Hamilton's report--twelve capital ships and twenty frigates --would cost far less than the land forces already approved by Congress. In fact, building a fleet even twice the size of the one envisioned by Hamilton would still be cheaper than raising the 35,000 regulars and 50,000 volunteers Congress had authorized. But in any event, he assured the House, twelve 74s and twenty frigates would be more than sufficient to satisfy the country's security needs. The British would actually have to keep three such fleets in continual rotation in order to maintain an equivalent force on the American station on a year-round basis, Cheves ended by noting that he preferred building ships-of-the-line; yet, given the limited amount of material on hand he was content to recommend constructing frigates for now and stockpiling timber for future expansion.69

Republicans who had listened to speakers earlier in the session decry the dangers of a large naval establishment were understandably flabbergasted by Cheves' two-day oration. "Some Republican leaders have gone navy mad," Jonathan Roberts of Pennsylvania informed his brother.70 Listening to the speech from the other side of the chamber, Federalist Samuel Taggart of Massachusetts observed with some bemusement that Cheves "whatever he may be nominally he is in reality as high a toned Federalist as ever was Alexander Hamilton." Yet, Taggart also put his finger on a key point when he
went on to describe the particular significance of Cheves' address: "A Federal speech in favor of the navy will be read by none but Federalists; but Cheves’s speech will be read all over the United States." Indeed, he was correct. Since the navy had been founded in the 1790s, Federalists had waged most of the battles for a bigger fleet inside of Congress. That a Republican from the South--the conservative heartland of the party--would champion such a grandiose program of naval expansion represented a startling break with tradition. Perhaps even more striking was the eagerness with which Republicans from all sections of the country would rally to his side during the next two weeks.

In presenting his case for expansion, Cheves was not so much rejecting the strategy of territorial conquest advocated by the administration and the War Hawks as attempting to add a new element to it. The plan to retaliate against Britain by invading Canada had his "hearty concurrence," he assured the House. But once Canada fell, "how and where shall we then continue the war without a naval force?" he asked. And how could the country hope to protect itself against future rivals, such as France or the soon to be independent states of Central and South America? The long-term interests of the United States demanded creation of a strong navy, Cheves insisted. The fate of the nation, as well as the Republican Party, depended upon it.

Cheves obviously hoped to capitalize on the belligerent mood of Congress. Yet, his decision to press for a long-term buildup of naval strength carried the risk of backfiring on him. Divorced from the address that accompanied it, the Naval Committee's bill was more moderate than excessive. Cheves sought only $1 million to begin work on the ten new frigates, plus an additional $780,000 to cover the costs of
repairing the existing vessels in ordinary, purchasing timber, and building a dock. But his speech risked polarizing the debate immediately, for he left no doubts that a vote for the bill would be seen as an endorsement of his plan for the establishment of a naval force along the dimensions outlined by Hamilton. Cheves even managed to alienate a member of his own committee, James Fisk of Vermont, who probably spoke the minds of many Republicans when he said that "when this subject was first presented to the House, he felt inclined to vote for a small increase of the Naval Establishment; but it now appears that, what is asked for is considered only as laying the foundation for a great system."\(^7^2\)

What made Cheves' advocacy of a strong navy even chancier was that it lacked any sort of sanction from the executive branch. Insofar as the army and volunteer bills were concerned, Republican moderates could always mollify their consciences by reminding themselves that they were acting on the administration's instructions. But neither Madison nor the Foreign Relations Committee had mandated any increase in the navy. By asking for so much, Cheves risked coming away with nothing at all.

The absence of executive endorsement marked one strike against Cheves' plea for naval expansion. The second strike came three days into the debate when the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, Ezekiel Bacon of Massachusetts, disclosed the contents of a letter from Treasury Secretary Gallatin. Back in November, Gallatin had been fairly sanguine about the state of the nation's finances. He informed Congress in the Treasury Department's annual report that in the event of war, government expenses for 1812 and thereafter could be met by a 50% or more increase in custom duties and perhaps a "selection of moderate internal taxes." In his letter to Bacon,
however, Gallatin drastically revised his earlier estimate. War would inevitably bring about a steep decline in revenue due to a decrease in trade. Furthermore, his November statement dealt only with ordinary expenditures, and did not take into account the costs of waging war. The war itself would have to be financed through loans, and servicing these new loans would require additional revenue. Therefore, to meet the regular expenses of government, including the interest on the war loans, Gallatin proposed doubling the existing duties on imports, reimposing a duty on salt, and levying $5 million worth of direct and indirect taxes.  

The Secretary's Hamiltonian prescription for financing the war stunned the nation. His detractors accused him of deliberately trying to sabotage the war effort, and at least one wild rumor circulated through Congress that Gallatin was actually conspiring with British minister Foster to this effect. Some observers, however, saw the navy bill as the target of Gallatin's report. "The other day, when we voted for the Army . . . we were rich then, but by some strange magic just before we were to give our votes on a few additional frigates, a report is ushered in from the Secretary of the Treasury," Republican William Widgery of Massachusetts complained.

The timing was indeed suspicious. Gallatin's letter was dated January 10, the day after the House approved the final version of the Senate's 25,000-man army bill. Gallatin had no doubt delayed drawing up his financial estimates until the bill had cleared Congress. But what triggered the suspicions of the navy's partisans were the circumstances surrounding its release. Bacon himself admitted that he was taking an unusual step in presenting the letter while the House was engaged in other business, instead of waiting until the Ways and Means Committee was ready to make its own
report. However, he felt that its contents were sufficiently important to warrant immediate disclosure. Bacon may well have been speaking honestly. Yet, Gallatin as a cabinet officer was notorious for trying to influence Congress with the aid of his political agents or allies. Vermont War Hawk John Harper thought he detected the hand of Gallatin's long-time confederate, John Smilie, in the affair. The 70-year old former Antifederalist from Western Pennsylvania was an ardent opponent of the navy. He was also a member of the Ways and Means Committee and so certainly would have been in a position to persuade Bacon to publicize Gallatin's letter ahead of schedule.

However the report came to light, the damage had been done. Supporters of the navy bill quickly tried to minimize the effects. Cheves urged his colleagues to pay no attention to the Secretary's alarmist statements: "[I]f gentlemen be satisfied, as he trusted they were, that a moderate increase of our Naval Establishment is expedient, this letter of the Secretary ought to have no effect upon them; for while Congress can raise a land force of 85,000 men, they can surely afford to appropriate the comparatively small sum asked for on account of the Navy." But this sort of plaintive appeal was unlikely to make much of an impression on Republicans who were already fearful of the expense of a big navy. The very fact that Cheves could come up with no more effective retort than imploring the House to ignore the letter suggests how much harm had been done to the navy's cause.

The third and final strike resulted from the War Hawks' inability to maintain a unified front on the navy issue. Many Republican militants did rally to Cheves' side during the debate. Cheves' messmate William Lowndes delivered a ringing address in support of naval expansion, as did several other Republicans. But during the debates, a
number of Republican delegates who were otherwise staunch advocates of military preparedness deserted the War Hawks. Pro-war Republicans from the South, West, and East attacked Cheves' proposals at every conceivable point. What was the use of building ships that would not be ready for service until after the current crisis had passed, naval foes wondered. Critics also declared themselves at a loss to understand how a large navy would ensure the safety of commerce when merchantmen flying the American flag ranged across every sea and ocean. Finally, a succession of speakers trotted out the standard litany of ideological objections against large navies that had been a staple of Republican political thought since the 1790s.79 "Peace and tranquility is not the natural state of a naval power," Richard Johnson of Kentucky declared. "A disregard of public law, sacred treaties, and bloodshed would suit it better; and it has been, and ever will be, the consequences of such a force."80

Despite the dissension within the Republican ranks, the first part of the bill authorizing the repair of the frigates in ordinary passed by a wide margin five days into the debate.81 But when it came to the second section, the building of the new frigates, opponents of the navy leapt to the offensive and moved to strike out the clause altogether. It was at this juncture, with the fate of Cheves' program clearly hanging in the balance, that the most powerful and admired Republican in the House, Henry Clay, stepped in to salvage the situation for the navy' supporters.

Whereas Cheves had been strident and uncompromising, Clay adopted a conciliatory tone. He complimented both sides for the "temper and ability with which the discussion had been conducted," while declaring himself to be in agreement with neither. This disclaimer was less than sincere, however, for the bulk of his speech consisted of an
extended plea for exactly the sort of naval force that Cheves had recommended. Clay
granted that Republicans were justified in opposing naval expansion in 1798 because the
nation lacked the means to support a large establishment. "But the state of things is
totally altered. What was folly in 1798 may be wisdom now," he explained. A navy
would be of immense service to all parts of the nation, the West no less than the East. He
reminded his associates from the West that the agricultural output of Kentucky,
Tennessee, and Ohio, not to mention the western halves of Virginia and Pennsylvania, all
flowed down a single artery, the Mississippi, before reaching the sea. Should a foreign
naval force succeed in blockading the mouth of the Mississippi, the region's export trade
would be annihilated. The benefits of a navy were indisputable, he said--the real issue
that needed to be decided was whether sufficient seasoned wood was available for
building new frigates. If so, then their immediate construction should be authorized; and
if not, then appropriations should be made to purchase the necessary timber.82

Clay's speech had the effect of subtly depolarizing the debate. While Cheves had
given Republicans a stark choice between expansion or no expansion, Clay presented
them with a third option--stockpiling materials for future enlargement--that fell
somewhere between these two extremes. After another week or so of discussion, the
House accepted this alternative. The clause calling for the construction of the ten frigates
was struck out completely on a 62 to 59 vote. The House also declined to allocate money
for a naval drydock. But in a pair of separate votes, the House agreed to spend $200,000
for three consecutive years for the purposes of stockpiling timber and other imperishable
materials.83

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The outcome of the debate represented a clear setback for the navy's boosters, but they still managed to preserve enough of their program to claim a small but important victory. If the House refused to condone an immediate increase in the navy, it did not rule out the possibility of expansion entirely. On the contrary, by authorizing the Navy Department to acquire a supply of seasoned timber and other materials, the bill explicitly laid the groundwork for a future program of naval building.84 Thus, far from shutting the door on naval expansion, the House of Representatives actually left it cracked wide open.

Throughout the two-week debate over the bill, several advocates of the navy commented sourly on the sectional nature of the deliberations. The House had readily approved a huge increase in the size of the army to ensure the safety of the nation's territorial frontiers, Robin Wright of Maryland reminded Republicans. But now that comparable steps were being considered to protect "our commerce, our seamen, and maritime frontiers," he was disturbed to discover "symptoms of geographical objections to the bill."85 Historians have largely echoed Wright's sectional interpretation, attributing the rejection of the clause providing for additional frigates to a combination of western and southern intransigence.86 However, this sectional explanation collapses under closer consideration. The voting as a whole did exhibit a clear partisan dimension: over the course of roll call votes on each of the bill's five sections, the 36 Federalists in the House cast a total of 147 votes in favor of the navy and only two votes against it.87

But the voting among the 106 Republican delegates to the House displayed a more skewed character. Wright was justified in complaining about western hostility to the navy: The nine Republican delegates from Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee voted as a bloc against the new frigates.88 Yet, Wright's aspersions were really only half-correct.
Far more instrumental in defeating this portion of the bill was the opposition from the mid-Atlantic states of Pennsylvania and New Jersey. All seventeen Republican delegates from Pennsylvania voted against increasing the navy, while four out of six New Jersey Republicans did the same. Two New Yorkers also disapproved of expansion. Collectively, then, Republicans from the mid-Atlantic supplied 23 of the 62 votes in favor of striking out the new frigates clause, more than any other region of the country.89

An examination of Republican voting on not just the frigate measure but on all five of the bill's provisions reveals an even more striking pattern.90 Although historians habitually depict the western states as the arch-enemies of the naval establishment, roll call tallies indicate that it was the Pennsylvania delegation that most consistently opposed legislation to strengthen the navy. Of the nine delegates from the West, only one, Samuel McKee, objected to every article in the bill. All-told, western Republicans voted against the navy 69% of the time.91 Pennsylvania, by contrast, took a considerably more hard-line stance on the navy issue. Seven of the state's seventeen Republican delegates voted against the entire bill, while another four were against all of the provisions save for outfitting the frigates in ordinary. Pennsylvania's record as a whole shows that its representatives opposed the navy on 78% of the roll call votes.92

If Pennsylvania proved to be the real seat of anti-navy sentiment in the nation, the region that emerged as the service's strongest advocate is equally surprising. The principal show of support for the navy in the Republican Party came not from maritime New England as might be expected but from the agrarian South.93 Southern Republicans voted in the navy's favor on 54% of the roll calls, as compared to 48% for party members from New England.94 In terms of raw numbers, the South's importance stands out even
more. Of the thirty Republicans who voted to keep the provision for new frigates in the navy bill, eighteen were from states south of the Delaware River. Southern Republicans also surpassed the rest of the nation in the intensity of their support for the bill. Overall, eleven southerners voted for every measure in the bill, as compared to only eight from all other states in the Union combined. Finally, southern Republicans also took the lead in actively promoting the navy bill during the debate on the floor of the House. Six of the nine Republicans who delivered major speeches on behalf of the navy hailed from the South.

While some Congressmen like Wright were inclined to blame sectional prejudices for the defeat of plans to increase the navy, at least one keen observer noted the anomalous nature of the proceedings. "It was a little extraordinary," John Smilie of Pennsylvania declared, "to find gentlemen from Kentucky [referring to Clay], patronizing this navy scheme, while the large shipping and commercial State of Pennsylvania does not want this alleged protection of commerce but really the machinery of power." Smilie's puzzlement is understandable and only serves to underscore the inadequacy of any interpretation of the debate based purely on a sectional interests. Undoubtedly, some of Pennsylvania's opposition to the bill can be explained in terms of the attitudes and orientation of individual delegates. For instance, William Rodman, a Quaker from Eastern Pennsylvania, had no enthusiasm for the war movement in general and he voted against almost all of the military preparedness measures.

Personal considerations aside, however, the consistent and extreme character of Pennsylvania's opposition to the navy suggests that there were other factors at work--factors whose influence was felt by all members of the state's delegation to Washington.
Proponents of naval expansion repeatedly maintained that a large, permanent battle fleet was needed for two reasons. First, the navy would shield the American coastline from attack in the event of war. Perhaps even more significantly, though, the creation of a powerful naval establishment would serve to protect American trade from foreign interference both for the present and in the future. Yet neither argument was likely to speak much to the concerns of Pennsylvania's Congressmen or their constituents. Pennsylvania had little to fear from foreign attack for the obvious reason that the state possessed no real maritime frontier. Deep-draft warships could only navigate the Delaware with some difficulty due to a bar in the river. And those enemy vessels that got over the bar would still have to run past the guns of Fort Mifflin, which guarded the approaches to Philadelphia.\textsuperscript{97}

The second rationale for increasing the navy was likely to leave Pennsylvanians equally unmoved. After reaching record-high levels in 1807, the nation's overseas trade had plummeted during the embargo and only partially recovered. Wholesale prices for many key export goods had declined precipitously since 1807, and by early 1812, many states were still struggling to regain their economic equilibrium. Advocates of naval expansion attributed the depressed condition of American commerce to its vulnerability. Without a naval force to protect the nation's trading interests, Britain and France were free to obstruct and plunder American commerce with impunity.

But as far as most Pennsylvanians were concerned, the state's commerce had been prospering quite nicely over the past four years.\textsuperscript{98} As with every other state, the embargo had shut down most of Pennsylvania's foreign trade. However, the effects had been temporary, and, by 1811, the value of domestic products exported from Pennsylvania had
actually surpassed its pre-embargo levels by almost 20%. A large portion of this booming trade consisted of flour and wheat shipped to feed the hungry armies of Britain and her allies in the Iberian Peninsula. Other Congressmen might bemoan the hardships brought on by European interdiction of American commerce. But Philadelphia's Adam Seybart saw no reason to complain. During the debate over the tax bill, he declared that "He had been told we were entering on a war for commerce. He did not so consider it. . . . Whilst the Pennsylvanians are selling their wheat for two dollars a bushel, it could not be said that they wanted a war to obtain any better price for their produce." Seybart was quite willing to grant that attacks on United States trade and impressment of American seamen represented an unacceptable infringement of "honor, liberty, and sovereignty." But in his eyes, the thriving state of Pennsylvania's economy demonstrated that overseas commerce needed neither a navy nor any other special protection to grow and flourish.

A boom in domestic manufactures contributed further to Pennsylvania's economic vitality and corresponding disinterest in the navy. The eve of the war found Pennsylvania leading the United States in industrial productivity. The value of its manufactures in 1810 totalled $32 million, equal to roughly 25% of the output of the entire nation. The 1808 embargo had actually served as a spur to local industry in the Philadelphia area by directing capital and labor away from maritime endeavors and toward home manufactures. Many Pennsylvanians expected war to provide additional encouragement to native manufacturing by functioning as a crude sort of protectionism. State Republicans celebrated the news of the declaration of war in June, 1812 with the toast, "Manufactures--let us teach the British we can do without theirs, by manufacturing
Pennsylvanians saw industrial development as an essential step toward the greater goal of economic self-sufficiency. Local industry would satisfy the demand for finished goods. At the same time, an expanding manufacturing sector would provide American farmers with a domestic market of sufficient size to absorb the bulk of their agricultural surplus. The creation of an integrated home economy thus promised to wean the nation from its dependence on foreign trade. Needless to say, economic independence also rendered the services of a navy all but unnecessary. A toast offered at a July 4, 1811 celebration in Philadelphia made this point in a fairly explicit fashion: "Our annual $150 millions of manufactures are more formidable to our enemies, and more valuable to ourselves, than 150 74-gun ships." A naval establishment costing millions was a useless appendage for a nation that could look to its own resources to meet its citizens' basic needs.

The same arguments for naval expansion that failed to impress Pennsylvania's delegation, however, resonated very differently among Republicans from the South. Republicans representing districts along the Chesapeake Bay and the south-Atlantic seaboard had every reason to fear for the safety of their constituents. During the debate over the navy bill, Burwell Bassett, a Republican from the Virginia Tidewater, elaborated on the dangers that residents of the coast would face in the event of war. His own district consisted, he said, of "more water than land; and you cannot go five miles in but few
directions without meeting with navigable water." Bassett predicted the British would follow the same strategy they had employed during the Revolutionary War and carry out a series of predatory raids down the length of the American coastline. Without adequate naval protection, thousands of lives and millions of dollars of property would be exposed to enemy attack.  

If the dictates of maritime defense provided one imperative for supporting naval expansion, economic conditions offered another. Jefferson's embargo of 1807 had sent the South's export-oriented economy spiraling into a depression whose effects persisted even after the lifting of trade restrictions. Growers of the region's two principal staples, cotton and tobacco, were particularly hard-hit. Upland cotton from South Carolina that sold for twenty-five cents a pound at Charleston in January, 1808 fetched only fourteen cents in February, 1810. The restoration of trade with France and England that same year failed to revive the state's commercial fortunes. The price of cotton continued to fall, bottoming out at eight cents a pound in 1811. Tobacco also fared badly between the years 1808 and 1811. Not only did prices for leaf tobacco drop, but so did the overall volume of exports, reducing what had been a $6 million industry during the pre-embargo years to one that was worth $1.5 million by 1812. Some planters were in such desperate straits that they stopped growing cotton and tobacco altogether and turned to the cultivation of other crops like corn.  

The region's prolonged economic slump may very well explain why so many southern Republicans from inland districts supported the drive to increase the navy. Southern proponents of the navy drew a direct connection between their economic woes and European interdiction of American trade. They argued that only a navy could
provide American producers with the freedom and the security to seek out the most profitable markets for their goods. In the speech that opened the debate over the navy bill, Langdon Cheves asserted that a strong naval force held the key to unlocking the commercial doors that had been closed to American farmers. With a navy to guarantee respect for the nation's maritime rights, "what would be the appreciation in value of the agricultural products of our country, which are now without purchasers and prices?" he asked the House. A powerful and permanent fleet was not a luxury but a necessity as the South's own distress of the last few years had clearly demonstrated.

Not all southern delegates were persuaded by these lines of reasoning. If the South supplied the largest bloc of pro-navy voters in the Republican Party, a significant number of Republicans from the region also opposed parts of the navy bill. In several cases, the navy's partisans and opponents came from districts whose interests, on the surface at least, were largely identical. For instance, John Dawson, Hugh Nelson, and James Pleasants, the three delegates from the tobacco-producing districts of the central Virginia Piedmont, were almost unanimous in their support for Cheves' naval program. Yet, their five neighbors to the immediate south--William A. Burwell, Matthew Clay, John Randolph, Thomas Gholson, Jr., and Peterson Goodwyn--who were also part of the state's tobacco-growing belt either objected to or failed to vote on most sections of the bill. By the same token, Virginia's John Taliaferro and Maryland's Stevenson Archer both represented districts fronting the Chesapeake Bay, but unlike Burwell Bassett, neither showed any interest in expanding the navy. In the final analysis, concerns about coastal security and the weak export trade provided southern Republicans with compelling reason to favor a stronger navy. But the degree to which delegates responded
to such arguments also appears to have hinged to a degree on their individual disposition, ideological inclinations, and ties of allegiance to other Republicans.

The Congressional debate over the navy did not end with the voting on January 29, 1812. The version of the bill passed by the House still had to be approved by the Senate before being signed into law. The War Hawks of both the pro- and anti-navy varieties had little influence in the Senate, although Cheves and Clay could count on their messmate George M. Bibb of Kentucky as an ally. On the whole, however, the trio of Invisible senators, William Branch Giles, Samuel Smith, and Michael Leib, constituted the most powerful presence in the upper chamber. Giles chaired the important select Committee on Foreign Relations, which was given the responsibility of reporting back on all foreign policy and military matters relating to Madison's annual address.

Most of the speeches in the Senate went unrecorded, so the deliberations in the upper chamber cannot be fully reconstructed. Apparently, the main responsibility for pleading the navy's case fell to James Lloyd, a Federalist merchant from Massachusetts. Lloyd introduced a motion to add a section to the House bill, authorizing the construction of new frigates. Not at all discouraged by the House's refusal to approve even three frigates, Lloyd suggested that twenty would be an appropriate number to build. He spent a good portion of his speech explaining why he felt the United States should not go to war against Britain. France was the real enemy, he contended, while Britain was actually the nation's biggest and best trading partner. But if the government was adamant about pursuing its present course, then he had one request to make: "Still, Sir, if we are going to war with Great Britain, let it be a real effectual, vigorous war. Give us a naval force." Flying squadrons of American frigates would wreak terrible havoc on the enemy's
commerce, thereby striking the British where they would feel it most--in their pocketbooks. Lloyd did not mince words. Unless the Senate consented to expand the navy, he could not in good conscience burden his constituents with the taxes and additional duties needed to underwrite the war.116

If the navy was the price of Federalist support, William H. Crawford of Georgia was not buying. Crawford was on good terms with Treasury Secretary Gallatin, which meant that he was no friend of the navy. Like just about every other Republican who spoke out against the navy, Crawford first made certain to declare his own appreciation for the value of commerce. "[T]here was no man in the nation more friendly to that commerce which he had described than he was," Crawford claimed. But he questioned the costs of the great naval force Lloyd wanted to build and he also disputed its usefulness. If thirty frigates could bring Britain to her knees, then why had not France with one hundred frigates done so already? Crawford also wondered how this same fleet of frigates would protect American commerce, especially when it was busy scouring the seas for British shipping.117

On March 6, the Senate rejected Lloyd's motion, 13-19. The voting in the Senate chamber displayed the same general pattern as in the House. Federalist senators supported naval expansion as a bloc, registering five yeas and one abstention. The Invisibles divided, with Giles and Smith voting to approve the motion and Leib opposing it. Overall, eight Republicans crossed party lines and sided with the navy. Once again, Republicans from the South led the way, contributing four of the positive votes, while Kentuckian George M. Bibb added a fifth. But the anti-navy sentiment in the Senate was too strong. After defeating the call for expansion by a comfortable margin, the navy's
opponents were able to gather enough votes to weaken the body of the bill as well. First, the appropriation for the repair of the frigates in ordinary was reduced from $480,000 to $300,000. This amendment carried an additional proviso confining the repairs to the frigates *Chesapeake*, *Constellation*, and *Adams*. Far more damaging to the navy's cause was the second amendment, which stipulated that timber was to be stockpiled solely for the purposes of rebuilding the remaining vessels in ordinary. The final amendment consisted of a new article requiring all navy purgers to have their appointments confirmed by the Senate and to post a $20,000 bond to ensure their good behavior.  

If the House's version of the bill deliberately left the door open to future expansion of the navy, the Senate's version slammed it shut tight. But pro-navy representatives refused to let their colleagues in the upper chamber have the last word. At Cheves' urging, the House rejected all three of the Senate's amendments. The Senate proved equally stubborn, however, and refused to recede on the amendments. With the proceedings at a standstill, each chamber agreed to appoint a committee to settle the matter in a joint conference. Henry Clay loaded the House committee with three of the navy's biggest boosters: Langdon Cheves, William Widgery, and Josiah Quincy. The Senate sent a more balanced group consisting of pro-navy James Lloyd, anti-navy William Crawford, and William Giles, who fell somewhere in the middle of the spectrum.  

Together, these six hammered out a compromise acceptable to both branches of the legislature. The most importance change concerned the disputed second amendment. The House had allocated $200,000 for three consecutive years to acquire stocks of seasoned timber for use in later construction. The Senate had sought to limit this
expenditure to rebuilding the frigates still in ordinary. The final version of the bill directed the first year's purchase of timber to be applied toward repairing the damaged frigates, but carried no restrictions on expenditures for the other two years. Thus, the door to expansion was cracked open once again. In this form, "An act concerning the naval establishment" was approved by both the House and the Senate in late March.\textsuperscript{120}

The Congressional debate over naval expansion sent tremors rumbling down deep and unsuspected fault lines in the Republican Party. The debate cut across factional, sectional, and even partisan divisions in Congress. For a time, War Hawk vied directly with War Hawk in exchanges that were often heated and acrimonious. In mid-April, the Federalist Alexandria \textit{Gazette} reported that the debate was believed to have produced a "deadly schism" among leading Republicans and the administration, the worse since the Yazoo affair of 1804.\textsuperscript{121} In reality, however, this claim represented no more than wishful thinking. The fissures that the navy issue opened up within Republican ranks proved temporary rather than permanent. The deliberations over the militia bill that followed on the heels of the navy debate were equally fractious. But by the time the House turned to the issue of financing the war, Republicans had succeeded in recovering some of their equanimity. From late February through the end of the session, Republicans as well as Federalists displayed consistently high levels of party unity.\textsuperscript{122}

The navy debate ultimately failed to derail the war movement because the disagreement over the bill revolved around means rather than ends. Proponents of expansion argued that the war could be waged more effectively with a strong naval force, and they were also concerned for the future security of the nation. But for the majority of the navy's partisans, the rejection of plans for new naval construction did not diminish
their support for military action or their belief in its necessity.\textsuperscript{123} From beginning to end, the dispute over the navy stayed within the bounds of the consensus for war established earlier in the session. The Federalist response to the navy debate was muted. A few Federalist politicians and writers praised some of the Republicans who had taken the lead in the fight for a larger fleet. A correspondent to the Charleston \textit{Courier} reported that "Particular credit is due to Mr. [Langdon] Cheves for his exertions." Connecticut Senator Samuel Dana also complimented Cheves as well as his two Carolina messmates, William Lowndes and John C. Calhoun, for their "talent and honorable principle."\textsuperscript{124} In general, however, Federalists viewed the voting on the navy bill as another sign that the Republican were not in earnest about their intentions to go to war. Only with the passage of the tax bill in March followed by the imposition of a 90-day embargo April did the Federalists begin to take their political opponents seriously. From April onwards, Federalist protests against the administration's policies increased in strength and volume, reaching a climax in the weeks immediately before and after the declaration of war in June.\textsuperscript{125}

Taking stock of this anti-war agitation, John Adams wrote to Thomas Jefferson that the Republicans had lost a golden opportunity back in January to win over the Federalists. Had Congress agreed to build a few frigates, this demonstration of the administration's sensitivity to mercantile interests would have appeased New England.\textsuperscript{126} Statements made by the Federalist Congressmen themselves during the deliberations over the navy lend credence to Adams' argument. Yet in the end, it is doubtful that a different outcome to the navy debate would have materially changed Federalist attitudes to the War of 1812. Federalists did not oppose the war simply because they felt the nation was
ill-prepared to fight it. Most Federalists rejected the very premises of the conflict. In their eyes, war with Britain was unjust and immoral and played right into the hands of the enemy of all freedom-loving people, the tyrant Napoleon of France. At best, Federalists might have viewed the Republican's willingness to increase the fleet as another reason to delay or postpone the initiation of hostilities. But in no way would passage of the bill have reconciled the Federalists to the government's decision to go to war in June of 1812.

In any event, the complete bill did not pass. A majority of Republican representatives refused to countenance the construction of even a small number of small frigates. As the lengthy and contentious debate in the press as well as in Congress clearly showed, most Republicans had no desire to place the navy "on a more respectable footing" as the *Intelligencer* had urged in September, 1811. For a variety of reasons, the party preferred to dispense with any increase in the American fleet and to trust instead to other measures to win redress from Britain. But if Congress ruled out new construction for the moment, it did not reject the possibility of naval expansion entirely. By authorizing the Navy Department to acquire a supply of seasoned timber and other materials, the bill in principle at least laid the groundwork for future expansion. Despite the changes enacted by the Senate, the navy's backers preserved enough of this crucial clause to carry their crusade forward to the next session of Congress.

More important than what the Congressional deliberations decided, though, was what the proceedings signified. In the past, small clusters of Republican Congressmen had voted for legislation to increase the service. But these Republicans tended to be independents on the fringes of the party or else politicians who represented constituencies
that were limited primarily to the northeast. The pro-navy coalition that took shape during the 12th Congress, however, transcended this narrow regional base and established deep roots in the South and even a solid foothold in the West. By acquiring for the first time substantial support among Republicans outside of New England and New York, the navy's backers ensured that their arguments would receive a fair hearing in regions that had previously turned a deaf ear to calls for naval expansion. Pro-navy Republicans recognized the importance of cultivating a broad following, and so they were careful to couch their appeals to the rest of party in very nationalistic terms. As Clay told the House, the navy would not be a tool of one part of the country or another, but rather would serve the interests of all sections, thereby cementing the bonds of the union in the process.

Admittedly, in 1811-12 this coalition was still very much a minority movement within the Republican Party. Yet, what it lacked in numbers in more than made up for in the stature and clout of its primary spokesmen. Legislators like Langdon Cheves and William Lowndes would occupy many of the key leadership positions in Congress for the duration of the war, while Henry Clay and John Calhoun were destined to dominate American politics for four decades to come. As one opponent of expansion conceded during the debates, "the best Democratic talents in the house" were lined up behind the navy.

The significance of these developments was not lost on contemporary observers. "The Cause of the Navy has acquired many new and able friends, and I think will finally prevail," a Federalist ventured in the New York *Evening Post*. But the most perceptive post-mortem was offered by Joseph Story, a distinguished Republican legal scholar from
Massachusetts and recent appointee to the United States Supreme Court. In a letter to a friend dated February 18, 1812, Story spelled out in almost prescient detail the implications of what had just transpired on the floor of the House:

> With the opinions expressed by you on the subject of a Navy, I most perfectly coincide; and I regret exceedingly that Congress have in this particular been so blind to their real interest. However, the Navy has gained a great many new advocates. . . . The talents, too, of the House are on the side of the Navy. You may depend, that if war ensues, the Navy spirit will triumph over every obstacle. . . . When you find South Carolina, and Kentucky, and Tennessee in the present Congress decidedly for the system, you may be assured that its triumph is not distant. 132
For details about the President-Little Belt affair, see the reports of their respective captains, John Rodgers and Arthur Bingham, reprinted in The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History, William S. Dudley, ed. (Washington, 1985), 1:41-49. Not surprisingly, each side claimed the other fired first. A Court of Inquiry convened at Rodgers' request absolved him of any blame.

2 Washington National Intelligencer, August 29, 31, September 14, 17, 1811.

3 Paul Hamilton to James Madison, September 17, 1811, in Madison papers, Library of Congress, reel 13. For the disposition of American naval vessels in late 1811, see Paul Hamilton to the House of Representatives, December 3, 1811, in American State Papers: Naval Affairs [hereafter ASP:NA] (Washington, 1832-34), 1:248-52. In addition to the forces mentioned above, a brig and a frigate were overseas waiting to return with dispatches. Five more frigates were laid up in ordinary in varying states of deterioration. Of the navy's fleet of 165 gunboats, 63 were in commission, while the other 102 were either in storage or under repair. The navy also had a 16-gun brig on Lake Ontario.

4 J.C.A. Stagg calls Madison's proclamation the most important act of his first term as President, indicating his resolve to abandon peaceful coercion and risk war if necessary to obtain redress from Britain. See Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783-1830 (Princeton, 1983), 78.


6 New York Evening Post, October 5, 1811.


8 Republicans and Federalists alike initially rallied around Commodore John Rodgers, the commander of the President. The whole incident, however, swiftly became grist for the partisan mill, with Federalists claiming that Rodgers had been given orders calculated to
provoked a confrontation with the British. Republicans, of course, dismissed the charge as absurd. For a sampling of Federalist accusations and Republican responses, see the New York Evening Post, May 27, June 4, 11, September 11, 1811, and the Washington National Intelligencer, June 8, July 16, September 3, 1811.

9 Emphasis in the original. The Intelligencer had been on close terms with the Republican Party leadership since the paper's founding in the fall of 1800. The Intelligencer's original publisher and editor, Samuel Harrison Smith, had originally set up shop in Washington at the urging of Thomas Jefferson and Albert Gallatin. After Jefferson's election as President, the gazette quickly acquired a reputation as a reliable source of government news and information. Although Jefferson exercised no control over its contents, the Intelligencer served as the administration's willing ally and strove to promote the policies and viewpoint of the chief executive. Jefferson, for his part, used the Intelligencer to publicize the administration's intentions and to steer public opinion in a favorable direction. The paper continued to fulfill the role of government spokesman after Smith sold his interest to his partner, Joseph Gales, Jr., in August of 1810. For details about the Intelligencer's relationship with the administrations of Jefferson and Madison, see William E. Ames, A History of the National Intelligencer (Chapel Hill, 1972), 15-91; Noble E. Cunningham, The Jeffersonian Republicans in Power: Party Operations, 1801-1809 (Chapel Hill, 1963), 258-64.

10 Technically speaking, of course, the United States already had a navy, complete with shore facilities and an administrative staff. When people debated the question of should the United States build a navy, they were thinking in terms of an establishment several orders of magnitude larger than the one the country currently possessed. The exact dimensions this fleet would assume were often left unstated, but it is safe to say that both supporters and opponents of naval expansion were envisioning a force that consisted of at least a dozen or so ships-of-the-line and twenty or more frigates.

11 See [Joseph Gales, Jr.], "Recollections of the Civil History of the War of 1812, By a Contemporary," Parts VI and IX, Washington National Intelligencer, August 8, September 12, 1857. See also Ames, National Intelligencer, 90-93.

12 [Gales], "Recollections," No. IX, Washington National Intelligencer, September 12, 1857. On at least one instance, in April of 1812, Monroe furnished Gales with the complete draft of an editorial for anonymous publication in the Intelligencer. At the time and for many years afterwards, this editorial was believed to have been written by Henry Clay. See Brant, James Madison, 434-36.

13 Louis Serurier to Duc de Bassano, September 29, 1811, in Brant, James Madison: The President, 358.

14 New York Evening Post, September 12, 1811.
For a superb analysis of the problems posed by party factionalism during Madison's first term, see Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War*, chapter 2.

The importance of newspapers in the public life of the early Republic cannot be stated too strongly. Although by no means perfect, newspapers generally served as a reliable barometer of public opinion. As Alexis de Tocqueville observed of the American press, "A newspaper can only survive if it gives publicity to feelings or principles common to a large number of men." But more than just reflecting public opinion, newspapers also actively strived to shape their readership's thinking. When it came to national affairs, editors saw their purpose as not just to inform, but to provide direction, to tell readers how to interpret and respond to political developments. Some gazettes made a pretense of proclaiming neutrality, but the majority openly expressed their partisan affiliations. Editors and publishers also typically aligned themselves with state and local interests as well. On the eve of the War of 1812, a contemporary journal estimated that there were more than 300 newspapers currently in business in the United States. See Robert A. Rutland, *The Newsmongers: Journalism in the Life of the Nation 1690-1972* (New York, 1973), 82-111; Cunningham, *Jeffersonian Republicans in Power*, 236-74; David Hackett Fischer, *The Revolution of American Conservatism: The Federalist Party in the Era of Jeffersonian Democracy* (New York, 1965), 129-49. Although dealing with a slightly earlier era, David H. Stewart's encyclopedic *The Opposition Press of the Federalist Period* (Albany, 1969) says much that is relevant to the Jeffersonian period as well.


Gales later cited this column as an example of an editorial that owed much to his conversations with Secretary of State Monroe. See [Gales], "Recollections," No. IX, *Washington National Intelligencer*, September 12, 1857.

For fairly representative opinions along these lines, see the New York *Morning Post* and the Kentucky *Gazette*, reprinted in the *Washington National Intelligencer*, September 19 and November 12, 1811. See also the Trenton *True-American*, reprinted in the *Lexington Reporter*, December 28, 1811.


Baltimore *Whig*, reprinted in the Philadelphia *Aurora*, October 9, 1811.

Kentucky Gazette and Kentucky Argus, reprinted in the Washington National Intelligencer, November 12 and December 7, 1811. See also the Lexington Reporter, December 31, 1811. Although all three citations are from Western papers, it would be a mistake to conclude that this anti-commercial sentiment was strictly a sectional phenomenon. There was growing interest among Republicans from all parts of country, and Pennsylvania in particular, in developing an integrated national economy that would free the nation from reliance on foreign markets and manufactures. This movement for economic independence would eventually find its fullest expression after the war in Henry Clay's American System. See Steven Watts, The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820 (Baltimore, 1987), 231-39. See also John R. Nelson, Liberty and Property: Political Economy and Policymaking in the New Nation, 1789-1812 (Baltimore, 1987), which portrays Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin as one of the leading apostles of American economic nationalism.


See, for instance, the Washington National Intelligencer, January 16, 1812, and the Lexington Reporter, March 7, 1812.


For a sampling of opinions attesting to the usefulness of privateers, see the Philadelphia Democratic Press, Boston Independent Chronicle, and Worcester National Aegis, all reprinted in the Washington National Intelligencer, October 3, 29, and November 26, 1811. See also the Baltimore Sun, reprinted in the Philadelphia Aurora, September 27, 1811, and the Lexington Reporter, December 31, 1811.


Frankfort (Kentucky) American Republic, reprinted in the Charleston Courier, November 5, 1811 (emphasis in the original); Kentucky Argus, reprinted in the Washington National Intelligencer, December 7, 1811.


Trenton True-American, reprinted in the Lexington Reporter, December 28, 1811; Kentucky Argus, reprinted in the Washington National Intelligencer, December 7, 1811. For a sampling of similar concerns, see "Yankee" in the Independent Chronicle, ibid.,
October 24, 1811; the anonymous letter from Bennington, Vermont, ibid., October 26, 1811; "Paoll" in the Pittsfield Sun, reprinted in the Lexington Reporter, November 30, 1811.

34 Lexington Reporter, October 26, 1811.

35 Kentucky Argus, reprinted in the Washington National Intelligencer, December 7, 1811. See also Lexington Reporter, December 31, 1811; Pittsfield Sun, November 30, 1811. This theme of British declension enjoyed widespread currency in colonial newspapers and pamphlets in the years leading up to the American Revolution. See Bailyn, Ideological Origins, 130-39. During the 1790s, British politics and society again came under regular attack, this time by Republican polemicists. The Republican diatribes were directed as much at the Anglophilic tendencies of the Federalists as they were at the perceived sins of Britain. See Stewart, Opposition Press, 132-141.


37 In reporting on the House of Representatives debate over naval appropriations in January, 1812, the Intelligencer scrupulously avoided venturing an opinion on the proceedings. The most the paper would allow was that the debate dealt with "an issue of vital importance." See the Washington National Intelligencer, January 23, 1812.

38 Gallatin, Notes on President's Message [of November 5, 1811], in Madison Papers, reel 26. Gallatin expressed a somewhat similar view during the 1807 war scare, informing Jefferson that American naval weakness would make it necessary to leave the brunt of the war at sea to privateering vessels. See Gallatin to Jefferson, October 21, 1807, in The Writings of Albert Gallatin, Henry Adams, ed. (Philadelphia, 1870), 1:360.

39 For the great stock the administration placed in privateering as a naval weapon, see Monroe's warning to an English correspondent about the devastation that would be wreaked on British commerce. Monroe [to Lord Auckland?], [fall of 1811], in The Writings of James Monroe, Stanislaus M. Hamilton, ed. (New York, 1898-1903), 5:193. For the administration's intentions regarding Canada, see Monroe's after-the-fact explanation to John Taylor, June 13, 1812, in ibid., 5:206-07. The administration planned to invade Canada, Monroe wrote, "not as an object of the war but as a means to bring it to a satisfactory conclusion."

40 For a classic study that emphasizes the centrality of the War Hawks, see Bernard Mayo, Henry Clay: Spokesman of the New West (Boston, 1966; first published 1937).


For the complete text of Madison's address, see *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, James D. Richardson, ed. (Washington, 1910), 1:476-481. At Gallatin's suggestion, he softened the language in a few places, but these changes did not appreciably alter the militant thrust of his remarks. For a discussion of Gallatin's influence on the message, see Irving Brant, *James Madison: The President, 1809-1812* (Indianapolis, 1956), 361-64. In keeping with the tradition established by Jefferson, Madison did not actually read his speech to Congress, but sent it over to the Capitol by messenger.

The House and Senate tallies are from Kenneth C. Martis, *The Historical Atlas of Political Parties in the United States Congress 1789-1989* (New York, 1989), 45. Louisiana was admitted to the Union toward the end of the session, adding two Republican senators and one Republican representative to the totals. Martis's roster of Republicans and Federalists conforms to the list published in the November 30, 1811 issue of *Niles' Weekly Register*. Representative Edwin Gray of Virginia is sometimes assigned to the Federalist Party on the basis of his voting behavior. See Table 12H in Martis, *Historical Atlas*, 45; Hatzenbuehler, "Party Unity and the Decision for War": 370, note 11.


Historians still disagree over exactly who should be designated a War Hawk. For contrasting views, see Reginald Horsman, "Who Were the War Hawks?", *Indiana Magazine of History* 60 (June 1964): 120-132, and Roger H. Brown, "The War Hawks of 1812: An Historical Myth," ibid.: 137-151. In this dissertation, the term War Hawk refers to those Republicans who supported the move toward war by their speeches, votes, and committee service.

These biographical details are drawn from *Biographical Directory of the American Congress 1774-1971* (Washington, 1971), 588, 692-93, 731, 748-49, 1040, 1312.

The last two members were Quid John Randolph and a Federalist, Philip B. Key of Maryland. See *Annals of Congress: Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States, 1789-1824* (Washington, D.C.: 1834-56), 12th Congress, 1st Session, 343. For biographical details about the nine committee members, see Hatzenbuehler, "The War Hawks and Congressional Leadership," 10-14. Hatzenbuehler argues that Porter should be discounted as a War Hawk on the basis of two anguished letters he wrote to the Secretary of War in April, 1812 imploring a postponement of hostilities until his state was better prepared. Hatzenbuehler has a point; however, Porter's eleventh-hour anxieties still do not alter that fact that in the first half of the session he was one of the leading proponents of war.


Monroe to the Foreign Relations Committee, November 28, 1811, James Monroe Papers, Ohio Historical Society. Unfortunately, only the cover letter has survived; the pages containing Monroe's suggested modifications appear to have been lost.

Political scientist Harry Fritz also emphasizes the importance of these early speeches. See Fritz, "The War Hawks of 1812": 33.

*Annals of Congress*, 12th Congress, 1st Session, 477. In declaring their intention to fight for American maritime rights, the War Hawks were careful to distinguish between the carrying trade and the export trade. The pro-war Republicans considered any infringement of the latter to be completely unacceptable. For examples of speeches drawing a distinction between the two kinds of trade, see the remarks of Peter Porter, Felix Grundy, and Jonathan Roberts, ibid., 415, 424, and 503.

Ibid., 415-16.

For a good analysis of Federalist strategy during this session of Congress, see Donald R. Hickey, "The Federalists and the Coming of the War of 1812," *Indiana Magazine of History* 75 (March 1979): 70-88.
The last two seats were given to Republicans Thomas B. Cooke of New York and James Fisk of Vermont, but neither showed any real interest in promoting the navy's cause. Cooke either abstained or absented himself from all of the roll call votes dealing with the navy, while Fisk actually voted against several parts of his own committee's bill. For Cheves' early career, see Archie V. Huff, Jr., *Langdon Cheves of South Carolina*, (Columbia, 1977), 3-52.


Hamilton was not very clear about how he had arrived at these numbers. In all likelihood, at least so far as the 74s were concerned, he merely followed the example of the previous department heads, Benjamin Stoddert and Robert Smith, who had used twelve ships-of-the-line as their benchmark figure. See Benjamin Stoddert to the House of Representatives, December 29, 1798, *ASP:NA*, 1:65-66.


See, for instance, the passage in J.C.A. Stagg's *Mr. Madison's War*, 146: "[Prompted by Cheves' letter], Hamilton seized the opportunity to call for a very sizable increase, with the building of twelve ships of the line carrying 74 guns and twenty frigates of 38 guns."

Many observers thought that Giles acted out of a desire to embarrass the administration. As Monroe explained a few months later, Giles and his political allies sought to "gain credit as being great advocates for war, and to throw discredit on the administration by implying on account of the moderation of its views that it was not in earnest, and really did not contemplate war." See Monroe to John Taylor, June 13, 1812, *Writings of Monroe*, 5:206-08. See also Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War*, 86-88. Although most historians have accepted Monroe's reading of the affair, there is reason to believe that Giles' motives were not entirely malicious. Throughout the fall of 1811, the Philadelphia *Aurora*, edited by Invisible William Duane, had been commenting on the strength of the British military presence in Canada. Recent reinforcements, an editorial
of November 25 warned, had swelled the size of the British army in Canada to 25,000 disciplined and well-led troops. Thus, in sponsoring his 25,000 man army bill, Giles may well have been acting out of genuine concern about the adequacy of the administration's own military preparations.

68 The Senate, however, promptly amended the bill, extending the right to commission officers to the individual states. See Stagg, Mr. Madison's War, 147-49.


73 For the complete text of Gallatin's annual report to Congress and his letter to Bacon, see *American State Papers: Class III, Finance* (Washington, 1832-34), 2:495-97, 523-27.


76 Bacon's remarks were not included in the *Annals of Congress*, but they were reported in the New York *Evening Post*, January 23, 1812.

77 John A. Harper to William Plumer, February 17, 1812, in William Plumer Papers (Library of Congress), reel 3. In the words of one Federalist in the 12th Congress, Smilie was "most notoriously the creature of Gallatin." Quoted in Ralph V. Harlow, *The History of Legislative Methods in the Period Before 1825* (New Haven, 1917), 199. See also the comments on Smilie in the Baltimore *Federal-Republican*, reprinted in the Charleston *Courier*, January 25, 1812.


Naval foes recognized the implications of this part of bill. Tennessee's John Rhea sought to have the clause removed precisely because approving the expenditure would be tantamount to pledging Congress to a program of naval expansion. See Ibid., 932.


On the five roll calls, Federalists also abstained from voting a total of 31 times. Most of these abstentions came from a group of four Federalists who, for one reason or another, did not register a single positive or negative vote on any section of the bill.

As Speaker of the House, Henry Clay only voted in the event of ties.

Another 21 Republicans from the south-Atlantic states and seven from New England supported the motion to remove the section.

The five articles were: (1) Allocation of $480,000 for the repair of the five frigates in ordinary. Approved 90-23. (2) Allocation of an unspecified amount of money for the construction of new frigates. Motion to strike out this section approved 62-59. (3) Allocation of $200,000 for the purchase of ship timber and other imperishable materials. Approved 82-37. (4) Authorization to make the above appropriation for three consecutive years. Approved 67-52. (5) Allocation of $100,000 for a dock. Motion to strike out this section approved 56-52.

The nine Republican delegates from the West cast a total of 31 votes against the navy and 11 in its favor. There were also three abstentions.

The breakdown for Pennsylvania is 66 anti-navy votes, 13 pro-navy votes, and 6 abstentions.

New England is defined as the states of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Vermont. Rhode Island and Connecticut are not included in this list since neither state sent any Republican representatives to Congress. The South is considered to encompass the states of Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia.
On the five roll calls, Southern Republicans cast a total of 112 pro-navy votes and 77 anti-navy votes. They also abstained on 16 occasions. New Englanders cast 29 positive votes and 22 negative votes, while abstaining 7 times. The voting records of delegates who abstained from or were absent for every roll call are not included in these tallies. Admittedly, New England's relatively weak showing is due in large part to the anti-navy stance of Vermont, a state which in many respects had little in common with its neighbors. If the votes of Vermont's three Republican representatives are excluded from these calculations, New England's level of support for the navy jumps to 60%. Nonetheless, the region's overall importance to the outcome of the voting is still limited due to the small size of its Republican delegations. Massachusetts sent only seven Republicans to the House, while New Hampshire contributed a mere four.


Victor A. Sapio, Pennsylvania and the War of 1812 (Lexington, 1970), 156.

For reference to the bar in the Delaware, see Albert Gallatin to Thomas Jefferson, July 25, 1807, Writings of Gallatin, 1:342.

Sapio, Pennsylvania and the War of 1812, 26-42. For a description of the economic conditions prevailing in the western part of the state, see Martin Kaufman, "War Sentiment in Western Pennsylvania: 1812, Pennsylvania History, 31 (October, 1964): 443-47.

The previous high for domestic exports from Pennsylvania was $4.8 million in 1807. In 1811, the state exported a little under $5.7 worth of domestic goods. Pennsylvania did fail to regain its pre-embargo share of the re-export trade. In 1810, the value of re-exports reached $6.2 million, less than half of what it had been in the bumper year of 1806. In 1811, re-exports declined even further. However, this trade benefited only a narrow segment of the economy, namely merchants and shipowners. For data on the foreign trade of all states during this period, see Timothy Pitkin, A Statistical View of the Commerce of the United States of America (New Haven, 1835), 50-56. Rudolph Bell's analysis of wholesale prices in several northern ports indicates the North as a whole bounced back quickly from the effects of the embargo. See Bell, "Mr. Madison's War": 389-90.

In 1811 and 1812, the United States shipped over 800,000 barrels of flour annually to Spain and Portugal. These two destinations accounted for more than 60% of all American flour exports. See Pitkin, Statistical View, 120. According to one contemporary report, flour from Philadelphia was prized over flour from other American ports due to its exceptional quality. See the extract of a letter from Lisbon in Philadelphia United States' Gazette, October 18, 1811.


Quoted in Sapio, *Pennsylvania and the War of 1812*, 164.


This was the theme of an editorial in the September 24, 1811 Philadelphia *Aurora*. A November 9 editorial in the same paper also extolled the virtues of manufacturing. Both columns stressed the need for internal improvements to facilitate this commercial exchange.


*Annals of Congress*, 12th Congress, 1st Session, 863-64.

Latimer, "South Carolina," 925-926. Wholesale prices for upland cotton at Charleston remained in the seven-to-ten cents range throughout the winter of 1811-12. See *Charleston Courier*, December 9, 16, 23, 30, 1811, January 6, 13, 27, February 1, 1812.


They cast a total of fourteen pro-navy votes and one anti-navy vote.

Their voting record on the navy bill consisted of six positive votes, nine negative votes, and ten abstentions.

Both opposed the building of additional frigates and extending the authorization to purchase timber beyond a single year.

Ibid., 131-47.

Ibid., 149-160.
The Yazoo affair referred to some fraudulent land purchases in the Southwest that were carried out during the Federalist era. In 1804, Jefferson's administration acted to resolve all claims relating to the affair. As part of the settlement, Jefferson agreed to allow part of the land sales to stand. This move outraged John Randolph and other Republican purists and marked the beginning of the Old Republican schism in the party. See Risjord, *Old Republicans*, 40-43.

A small but significant exception is the bloc of six Republican representatives from New York and one from New Jersey who voted in favor of the new frigates in January but against the war in June. Most of these Republicans were Clintonians, who believed the war would spell the ruin of commerce and shipping while also visiting destruction upon New York City.

Charleston *Courier*, February 8, 1812. Dana's comments are quoted in Carl J. Vipperman, *William Lowndes and the Transition of Southern Politics, 1782-1822* (Chapel Hill, 1989), 90.


Brown, *1812: The Republic in Peril*, 166-176. Federalists also feared the effects that war would have on the nation's republican institutions. See Lawrence D. Cress, "Cool and Serious Reflection": Federalist Attitudes toward War in 1812," *Journal of the Early Republic* 7 (Summer 1987): 123-46.

Prime examples of the former type would be Orchard Cook of Maine and Matthew Lyon of Kentucky, both of whom vigorously argued for building frigates and ships-of-the-line during Jefferson's presidency. See *Annals of Congress*, 9th Congress, 1st session, 525-530, 1043-1051; *Annals of Congress*, 10th Congress, 1st Session, 1094-1098. During the 9th and 10th Congresses, the navy was also consistently supported by a small
bloc of Republicans from New York State who were followers of Congressman George Clinton.


131 New York Evening Post, January 30, 1812.

132 Joseph Story to William Fettyplace, February 18, 1812, in Life and Letters of Joseph Story, William W. Story, ed. (Boston, 1851), 1:220. The inclusion of Tennessee in his list is a trifle puzzling, since all three of its delegates voted against the new frigates. In all likelihood, Story was thinking of John Sevier, who did support the provisions for stockpiling timber over a three-year period. He was the only western delegate to do so.
CONCLUSION

Joseph Story's prediction was accurate. Over the next four years, Clay, Cheves, and the others would draw increasing numbers of Republicans into their fold, tipping the balance of Republican opinion decisively in the navy's favor. Of course, the navy did immeasurable service to its own cause. The navy’s frigate captains in the opening months of the war covered themselves in laurels by winning a series of single-ship duels that stunned observers on both sides of the Atlantic. Their victories had a negligible effect on the balance of naval forces in the war, but they had enormous impact on American morale and the navy’s public standing. On the northern frontier, U.S. naval commanders destroyed British squadrons on Lakes Erie and Champlain in triumphs that did carry genuine strategic significance. By the cessation of hostilities, the tiny American navy had confounded almost every expectation not only by surviving the war but by more than holding its own against the Royal Navy when the odds were anything close to equal.

The navy nonetheless still needed strong backing in Congress to see its martial successes converted into legislative gain. The service received this support from the pro-navy faction in the Republican Party that steadily grew in size as the war progressed. But the triumph of the “Navy Spirit” was one that the Federalists fully shared in as well. The obstructionist policies of Federalist leaders during the war and their toying with the idea of succession would leave the party thoroughly discredited by the end of the conflict. But before they were consigned to oblivion, party members made one final and lasting contribution to the development of the nation by joining forces with pro-navy
Republicans to ensure passage of the Naval Act of 1816. This landmark bill went beyond what even Stoddert had considered politically feasible in the 1790s. It committed the United States to a gradual and long-term plan of capital ship construction, calling for the expenditure of $1 million dollar annually over the next eight years for the purposes of building nine ships-of-the-line and twelve frigates.

Passage of the Naval Act of 1816 brought the nation full-circle back to where it had stood in the 1780s, when men like George Washington and James Madison had argued for a navy in almost the precise terms used by Republican leaders in Congress after the war. The change in naval policy was accompanied by an equally fundamental transformation in Republican ideas about the navy. Republicans had previously based their opposition to the Federalists’ naval plans on practical, political, and ideological grounds. But the emergence of the pro-navy faction within the Republican Party stripped the issue of its political associations. No longer could Republicans dismiss naval expansion as a Federalist program. In the future, the fortunes of the navy would not be tied to one party or the other. In other words, it would cease to be a highly charged, partisan issue.

Republican ideology also underwent a critical change. By 1816, Republicans ceased to perceive a large naval establishment as a threat to the general welfare of the Republic. In fact, they had come to see a big navy as an important institution not only for the sake of national defense but also as a tangible expression of national pride. That is not to say that elements of the old antinavy ideology did not linger on within Republican circles. But the negative view of the navy that had predominated in the party in the late
1790s and early 1800s had been replaced by one that saw the navy in a positive light. The discourse had shifted.

In the next few decades, Congress ended up backing away from some of the provisions of the 1816 act, leaving a number of the ships unfinished. But this was primarily due to several factors separate from political or ideological considerations. First, the nation suffered a severe economic recession beginning in 1819 that led the government to cut back spending on all programs. Second and more significantly, both the technological and international context had shifted, prompting a reconsideration of the government’s plans for naval expansion. A long-term building program that included the collection of timber and stores for future construction and even the partial building of ships only made sense at a time of technological stability. The technology of shipbuilding had, in fact, experienced a long period of stability lasting upwards of a century. The sailing ships of the Napoleonic Era were not substantially different than the warships that had fought during the Revolution or earlier Anglo-French naval struggles. Properly cared for, warships could have careers lasting into the decades, like Nelson’s famed flagship *Victory*, which saw active service in the Royal Navy from 1759 to 1836. After 1815, however, the technology began to change as European naval powers experimented with steam-powered vessels. In this context, it ceased to make sense to invest in partially-finished warships that might become obsolete in a few years.

The international context had also changed. American leaders initially viewed the Treaty of Ghent as no more than a truce, and many fully expected the nation to go to war against Great Britain again in the near future. That did not happen, of course. After more than a century of recurrent conflict, Britain and France also avoided waging another
round of warfare against one another. The European powers still fought each other, but these struggles were largely focused on the European heartland and involved continental powers like Prussia and Austria. The Atlantic sea lanes also ceased to be the focus of contention between the Great Powers. Another general war would not convulse the Atlantic world until almost a hundred years after the conclusion of the War of 1812. And while merchant shipping would again become a prime target for the belligerents, this war would be fought with very different technology and with Britain and France as allies rather than enemies.

Thus, the age of Atlantic warfare that had shaped the worldviews of American leaders at the time of the Revolution came to a close. American commerce during the Antebellum Era was no longer threatened by warring states that preyed on the shipping of neutral nations. And with this threat to American trade removed, it also eliminated one of the prime rationales for maintaining a large navy: to deter aggression. In the decades after the War of 1812, U.S. naval vessels would stay busy sailing in foreign waters. But this cruising was intended to show the flag and protect American commercial interests from interference by pirates and petty powers, not the great maritime states of Europe. In performing these peacetime missions, the U.S. no longer needed a powerful fleet of capital ships capable of battling the naval forces of Britain or France. Instead, smaller warships that were relatively inexpensive to operate could function just as well as if not better. Consequently, the Naval Act of 1816 turned out to be designed for international conditions that no longer existed. In the final, crowning irony, by the time American leaders accepted the policy that naval supporters had advocated since the end of the
Revolution, the circumstances themselves had changed to render this policy no longer relevant or useful.
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