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## War of 1812: British Impressments, Attacks Push US into First Declared War

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In 1812, just thirty years after the Declaration of Independence and 200 years ago this year, the United States found themselves once again in a war with Great Britain. At the time the Royal Navy was the most powerful in the world. They boasted a 1,000-ship navy. With some 600 ships underway at any time they dwarfed the fledgling US Navy that consisted of only 20 men-of-war, 7 of which were laid up for repair and 2 that were probably beyond repair.

With this power, they focused on the fight against Napoleon in the Mediterranean, the Caribbean and by blockading the ports of France. But they also had a continuous presence off the American east coast. The Royal Navy seized American merchant vessels departing the Chesapeake Bay and forced their crews into Royal Navy service, this practice was called “Impressment”.

Impressment was appalling to Americans and spurred a nation-wide feeling of resentment toward the British.

In June 1807, a British frigate HMS Leopard attacked the American 36-gun frigate USS Chesapeake, demanding to search for British deserters. When Chesapeake refused to allow British sailors to board, the Leopard fired on Chesapeake, wounding or killing many of its crew members. Chesapeake surrendered and the Royal Navy forced Chesapeake sailors into servitude.

The news rippled through the U.S., sparking anger, however, President Thomas Jefferson decided against declaring war on Britain.

Then James Madison, who signed the Declaration of Independence, helped write the Virginia Constitution and participated in political events throughout the Revolutionary War was elected in 1808. Madison tried for four years to negotiate and avoid war.

But with discontent growing to an unstoppable peak, Madison asked congress to declare war on the British on June 1, 1812.

According to the Library of Congress, the House of Representatives passed the declaration on June 4, 1812, and the Senate followed on June 17, 1812.

“... The Congress of the United States, by virtue of the constituted authority vested in them, have declared by their act ... that war exists between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and the dependencies thereof, and the United States of America and their territories,” said the proclamation. “Therefore I, James Madison, president of the United States, do hereby proclaim the same to all whom it may concern.”

For more information, visit [ourflagwasstillthere.org](http://ourflagwasstillthere.org) and [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov).

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