

Questioning Historical Evidence: Were the Main Causes of the War of 1812 on the High Seas or on the Frontier?

by Allan Hux

Suggested grade level: intermediate / Senior

Suggested time: up to 2 periods

Brief Description of the Task

Have students compare President Madison's War Message to Congress and the voting patterns of the members of Congress to raise some questions about the causes of the War of 1812.

Historical Thinking Concepts

- Use of Evidence
- Cause and Consequence

Learning Goals

Students will participate in an activity that will allow them to:

1. Examine the statements of political leaders in the U.S. Congress.
2. Review the voting records of the members of Congress in June 1812.
3. Raise questions about the contradictions in the evidence.
4. Consider the context of causes and the historical agents who had power and how they chose to act.

Materials

Photocopies of all appendices.

Prior Knowledge and Skills

It would be an asset for students to have:

- some familiarity with the general causes of the War of 1812 as provided by textbooks or websites

Assessment

- teacher observation of student participation in class discussion and individual student contributions to group discussions
- student answers to questions and the rank order of causes list

Detailed Lesson Plan

Focus Question: Were the main causes of the War of 1812 maritime or frontier issues?

1. Engage students in a brief introductory discussion on historical evidence and how we learn about the past. Ask students:

- How do we know about the past?
- What are the different types of evidence that have survived from the time before, during, and after the War of 1812?
- How should we interpret what we read and see?
- What questions should we ask about the author of a document? (Who was the author? What was her/his purpose? What was the author's point of view? Bias?)
- Who was the audience?

2. a) Provide students with an edited version of President James Madison's War Message to Congress (**Appendix 1**). Have students identify the main reasons that President Madison gave for asking Congress to declare war and ask students to rank these reasons by importance based on their reading of the message.

Madison refers to the rights of sovereign nations, the individual rights of American citizens like sailors, the rights of American farmers and producers to sell their products abroad, and the rights of American shipping companies to trade freely on the high seas. Note that Madison's

full War Message was 2858 words long. Only 105 words addressed the problem of Indian warfare on the frontier and the responsibility of British traders and garrisons. The Canadas, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and their major centres, Kingston, Montreal, Quebec and Halifax were not mentioned. You may share this information with the students at an appropriate time.

b) Depending on the reading level of students use a reading strategy that is appropriate. This may involve a read aloud, a think aloud followed by students working in pairs, or a shared reading strategy in small groups.

c) **Appendix 2** provides a possible set of questions and an organizer to guide students' deliberations.

3. Discuss with students what historians mean when they talk about "causes." Remind students that causes may be categorized in several ways and that there are usually multiple causes for an event. Historians make a professional judgment to rank the importance of causes and must be open to changing their interpretations based on the evidence. Individual historical actors or agents had different degrees of power and the ability to take action and were limited by the times and the context.

4. Have students examine the voting record of members of Congress from the different states and share their observations. (See **Appendix 3**.)

5. Ask students what questions they have when they compare the arguments presented in the War Message and the voting of coastal trading states and states with western borders facing Indian territories or near to the British American colonies. (See **Appendix 4**.)

6. Ask students to review some of the other statements by members of Congress and citizens on the causes of the War of 1812 (**Appendix 5**) and prepare a new rank order of the causes based on the additional evidence.

Ask them to clarify Nicolas Smyth's point and weigh its significance.

7. Ask students to review and revise the set of questions that they would like to ask about the evidence on the causes of the War of 1812. What additional information do they need to make a more accurate interpretation of the causes of the War of 1812? They should add to their responses on **Appendix 4**.

8. Ask students to consider why American leaders would place such a great emphasis on the rights of their nation, but would not extend the same rights to Indian First Nations.

Appendix 1 - JAMES MADISON War Message to Congress (June 1, 1812)

To the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States:

... Great Britain is engaged ... [in] a series of acts hostile to the United States as an independent and neutral nation.

British cruisers have been in the continued practice of violating the American flag on the great [seas, the] highway of nations, and of seizing and carrying off persons sailing under it, ... [impressment]

[T]housands of American citizens, under the safeguard of public law and of their national flag, have been torn from their country and from everything dear to them; have been dragged on board ships of war of a foreign nation and exposed, under the severities of their discipline, to be exiled to the most distant and deadly climes, to risk their lives in the battles of their oppressors, and to be the melancholy instruments of taking away those of their own brethren....

British cruisers [war ships] have been in the practice also of violating the rights and the peace of our coasts. They hover over and harass our entering and departing commerce. To the most insulting pretensions they have added the most lawless proceedings in our very harbors, and have wantonly spilt American blood within ... our territorial jurisdiction.

Under pretended blockades, ... our commerce has been plundered in every sea, the great staples of our country have been cut off from their legitimate markets, and a destructive blow aimed at our agricultural and maritime interests....

Not content with these occasional expedients for laying waste our neutral trade, the cabinet of Britain resorted at length to the sweeping system of blockades, under the name of orders in council, which has been molded and managed as might best suit its political views, its commercial jealousies, or the avidity of British cruisers.

To our remonstrances against the ... injustice of this ..., the first reply was that the orders were reluctantly adopted by Great Britain as a necessary retaliation on decrees of her enemy [France] proclaiming a general blockade of the British ... The British Government would ... [not] rescind the blockade ... [and] proceeded from a spirit of hostility to the commercial rights and prosperity of the United States; and ... [the British] Government was employed in intrigues having for their object a subversion of our Government and a dismemberment of our happy union.

In reviewing the conduct of Great Britain toward the United States our attention is necessarily drawn to the warfare just renewed by the savages on one of our extensive frontiers — a warfare which is known to spare neither age nor sex and to be distinguished by features peculiarly shocking to humanity. It is difficult to account for

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the activity and combinations which have for some time been developing themselves among tribes in constant intercourse with British traders and garrisons without connecting their hostility with that influence ... [of] the officers and agents of that [British] Government.

Such is the spectacle of injuries and indignities which have been heaped on our country...

... We behold our seafaring citizens still the daily victims of lawless violence, committed on the great common and highway of nations, even within sight of the country which owes them protection. We behold our vessels, freighted with the products of our soil and industry, or returning with the honest proceeds of them, wrested from their lawful destinations, confiscated ... [and] their unfortunate crews dispersed and lost, or forced or inveigled in British ports into British fleets,

We behold ... on the side of Great Britain, a state of war against the United States, and on the side of the United States a state of peace toward Great Britain.

Whether the United States shall continue passive ... or, opposing force to force ... is a solemn question which the Constitution wisely confides to the legislative department of the Government [Congress]. In recommending it to their early deliberations I am happy in the assurance that the decision will be worthy ... of a virtuous, a free, and a powerful nation. ...

<http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/historicspeeches/madison/warmessage.html>

Appendix 2 - Observations on the Evidence

1. What reasons did President Madison give in recommending that Congress vote to declare war against Great Britain?
2. How many of these reasons are related to **M**aritime conflicts on the high seas, how many are related to conflicts on the **F**rontier and how many are related to national rights and **P**ride? Put an **M**, **F** or **P** beside the causes in your answer to number 1.
3. How do you think that President Madison ranked the different causes in order of importance? Place the number 1 beside the most important cause, 2 beside the second most important cause, 3 beside the next cause, etc. Why do you think that a southern planter would place such an emphasis on Maritime issues?
4. Check a map of North America including the U.S.A. around 1812. Which states had the closest links to the sea and shipping and which states extended to or were in the West and depended on farming with little or no shipping? List the various states on the chart below.
5. Compare the voting record of the costal or sea states and the predominantly farming and frontier states on the war resolution. Record the votes on the chart below. In which regions are the "For" states and the "Against" states located? [North, Middle, South, West]

Appendix 3 - Votes in Congress on Madison's War Message to Congress

States	House of Representatives June 5, 1812		Senate June 18	
	For	Against	For	Against
New Hampshire	3	2	1	1
Vermont	3	1	1	
Massachusetts (including Maine)	6	8	1	1
Rhode Island	0	2	0	2
Connecticut	0	7	0	2
New York	3	11	1	1
New Jersey	2	4	1	1
Delaware	0	1	0	2
Pennsylvania	16	2	2	0
Maryland	6	3	1	1
Virginia	14	5	2	0
North Carolina	6	3	2	0
South Carolina	6	0	2	0
Georgia	3	0	2	0
Ohio	1	0	0	1
Kentucky	5	0	1	1
Tennessee	3	0	2	0

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TOTALS	79	49	19	13
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Appendix 4

A) Your Questions about the Evidence on the Causes of the War of 1812

1.

2.

3.

4.

B) What hypothesis would you offer on the causes of the War of 1812?

Appendix 5 – Other Statements on the Causes of the War of 1812

1. Representative Felix Grundy of Tennessee, 1811

“This war, if carried on successfully, will have its advantages. We shall drive the British from our continent. They will no longer have an opportunity of intriguing with our Indian neighbors.... [H]er means of annoying us will be diminished.”

http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Wikiquote:Transwiki/American_History_Primary_Sources_The_War_of_1812

2. Representative John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, 1812

"I believe that in four weeks from the time a declaration of war is heard on our frontier, the whole of Upper Canada and a part of Lower Canada will be in our power."

quoted in Robert Allen Rutland, *The Presidency of James Madison* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), 105. <http://www.shmoop.com/war-1812/citations.html>

3. Representative Henry Clay of Kentucky, 1813

The gentleman from Delaware sees in Canada no object worthy of conquest. According to him, it is a cold, sterile, and inhospitable region. ...Other gentlemen consider the invasion of that country as wicked and unjustifiable. Its inhabitants are represented as unoffending, connected with those of the bordering states by a thousand tender ties, interchanging acts of kindness and all the offices of good neighborhood; Canada ... innocent! Canada unoffending! It is not in Canada that the tomahawk of the savage has been molded into its death-like form? From Canadian magazines, Malden and others, that those supplies have been issued which nourish and sustain the Indian hostilities?

4. Nicolas Smyth in a letter opposing war in 1812

“We hear from the halls of Congress the cry ‘On to Canada!’ It is the fur dealer and the land speculator who want war, but it is we of New England who will pay the price... The War Hawks of Tennessee and Kentucky are safe. I doubt if the English navy can reach them.”

http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Wikiquote:Transwiki/American_History_Primary_Sources_The_War_of_1812

**Appendix 6 - Ranking Some of the Causes of the War of 1812
in Order of Importance**

President Madison's Rank Order of the Causes	Your Rank Order of the Causes
The reasons for your order of causes:	