

Unit 3: The New Nation (1789–1825)

DBQ 6: The War of 1812

Historical Context:

In 1812, only 29 years after the American Revolution, the United States found itself again at war with Great Britain. The threat of war had been brewing for some time, and this War of 1812 was not unexpected. Since the 1790's, America's leaders had tried to avoid being drawn into a series of wars between France and Britain. In 1793 President Washington issued a proclamation of neutrality asking his countrymen to be impartial toward both Britain and France. In 1800 President Adams agreed to the Convention of 1800. This ended the alliance America had formed with France during the American Revolution, an alliance which now threatened to draw America into Europe's wars. Following Adams, President Jefferson continued to steer clear of war with France and Britain. However, when both countries violated American trading rights, with Britain often stopping American ships, seizing cargoes, and kidnapping sailors (a practice called "impressment"), Jefferson called for a total embargo (or ban) on American trading. Unfortunately, this "Embargo of 1807" failed to force the European powers to respect our rights, and severely harmed our own economy, throwing thousands of merchants, shippers, and sailors out of work. When James Madison became president in 1809, he found himself facing the same problem: How could we force Britain and France to respect our rights on the high seas without being forced to war? Finally, after three years of failed diplomatic efforts, Madison asked Congress to declare war on Great Britain.

◆ **Directions:** The following question is based on the accompanying documents (1–8). As you analyze the documents, take into account both the source of the document and the author's point of view. Be sure to:

1. Carefully read the document-based question. Consider what you already know about this topic. How would you answer the question if you had no documents to examine?
2. Now, read each document carefully, underlining key phrases and words that address the document-based question. You may also wish to use the margin to make brief notes. Answer the questions which follow each document.
3. Based on your own knowledge and on the information found in the documents, formulate a thesis that directly answers the question.
4. Organize supportive and relevant information into a brief outline.
5. Write a well-organized essay proving your thesis. The essay should be logically presented and should include information both from the documents and from your own knowledge outside of the documents.

Question: *What forces led Americans to declare war on Britain in 1812?*

◆ **Part A:** The following documents address the factors that led America into war with Britain in 1812. Examine each document carefully, and answer the question or questions that follow.

(continued)



DBQ 6: The War of 1812 (continued)

Document 1

In November 1811, the Committee on Foreign Relations of the U.S. House of Representatives reported on our nation’s growing conflict with France and Britain. In the following excerpt, the report explains our complaints against Britain. (From *Annals of the Congress of the United States*, Twelfth Congress.)

To sum up, in a word, the great causes of complaint against Great Britain, your committee need only say, that the United States, as a sovereign and independent Power, claim the right to use the ocean, which is the common and acknowledged highway of nations, for the purposes of transporting, in their own vessels, the products of their own soil and the acquisitions of their own industry. . . . Great Britain, in defiance of this incontestable [clear and certain] right, captures every American vessel bound to, or returning from, a port where her commerce is not favored; enslaves our seamen, and in spite of our [complaints and protests], perseveres in these aggressions.

According to this congressional report, what was America’s major complaint against Great Britain? _____

Document 2

This excerpt is from a speech made by Congressman John C. Calhoun, a Democratic-Republican member of the House of Representatives from South Carolina. Calhoun gave this address on December 12, 1811, six months before war was declared on Britain—but at this time, he clearly foresaw the threat of war. (From *The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States, First to Eighteenth Congress*, Vol. 23.)

The question . . . 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. . . . I know of one principle to make a nation great . . . and that is to protect every citizen in the lawful pursuit of his business. . . . Protection and patriotism are reciprocal . . . if [the British] persist in such daring insult and injury to [the United States], it will be bound in honor and interest to resist.

How does this statement by Congressman Calhoun support Document 1? _____

(continued)



DBQ 6: The War of 1812 (continued)

Document 3

This excerpt is from a speech by Congressman John Randolph of Virginia, given in the House of Representatives on December 16, 1811. (From *Annals of Congress*, Twelfth Congress.)

... if you go to war it will not be for the protection of ... maritime rights. Gentlemen from the North have been taken up to some high mountain and shown all the kingdoms of the earth; and Canada seems tempting in their sight. ... Agrarian cupidity [greed for farm land], not maritime right, urges the war.

What did Congressman Randolph believe was “really” behind the talk about war with England?

Document 4

These excerpts from President Madison’s Declaration of War were read to Congress on June 1, 1812.

We behold our seafaring citizens still the daily victims of lawless violence. ... We behold our vessels ... wrested [taken] from their lawful destinations ... in [to] British ports. ... We behold, in fine, on the side of Great Britain a state of war against the United States ...

According to this excerpt from President Madison’s Declaration of War, what seemed to be the primary reason for the War of 1812? _____

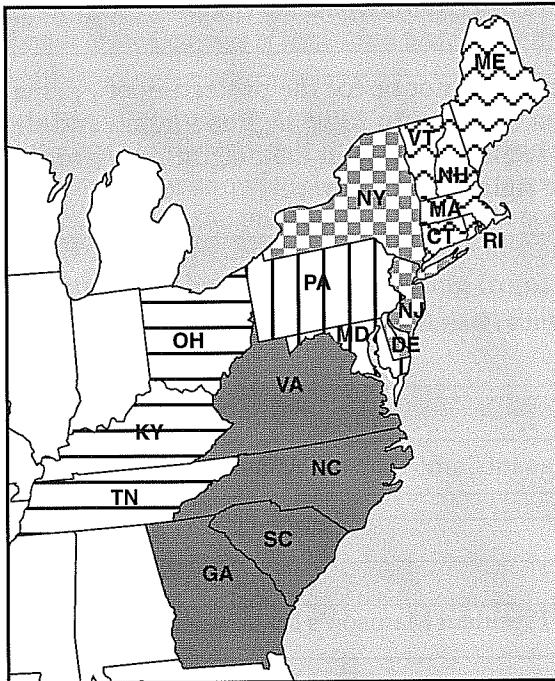
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DBQ 6: The War of 1812 (continued)

Document 5

The U.S. House of Representatives vote for war, June 4, 1812.

KEY	
	New England: yes—12; no—20
	Maritime & Commercial Mid-Atlantic States: yes—5; no—16
	Agricultural Mid-Atlantic States: yes—22; no—5
	The South: yes—31; no—3
	The Western Frontier: yes—9; no—0



Should the United States Declare War on Britain?

Which regions favored war with England in 1812? _____

Which regions opposed war with England in 1812? _____

How does Document 5 seem to contradict Documents 1, 2, and 4? _____

Document 6

The congressional vote for war, by political party:

Vote Approving the Declaration of War on Britain in 1812 (Both House of Representatives and Senate Votes Combined)			
Federalists		Democratic-Republicans	
YES	NO	YES	NO
0	40	98	22

Which party totally opposed the War of 1812? _____

Which party strongly favored the War of 1812? _____

To which party did President Madison belong? _____

(continued)



DBQ 6: The War of 1812 (continued)

Document 7

This is an excerpt from a letter written in July 1812 by Congressman Hugh Nelson of Virginia in which he explained why he voted for war. (Quoted from Roger Brown, *The Republic in Peril: 1812*, Columbia University Press, 1964, p. 77)

... to demonstrate to the world ... that the people of these states were united, one and indivisible ... to show that our republican government was competent to assert its rights, to maintain the interests of the people, and to repel all foreign aggression ... My conduct as your representative has been regulated entirely by these great and important considerations.

What reasons did Congressman Nelson give for his support of war in 1812? _____

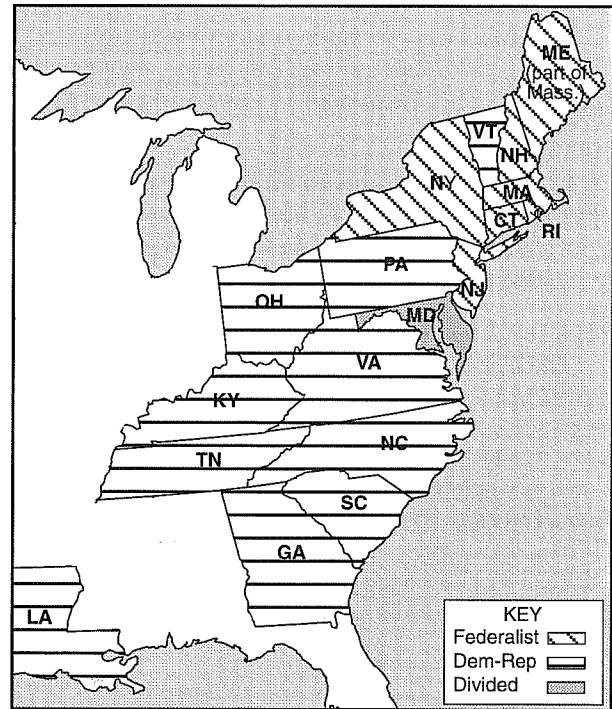
Document 8

The presidential election of 1812

In November of 1812, President Madison narrowly won reelection against the Federalist candidate DeWitt Clinton, the governor of New York State. The election occurred five months after the war with Britain began.

Which regions of our country supported the reelection of President Madison?

Which regions opposed his reelection?



◆ Part B—Essay

What forces led Americans to declare war on Britain in 1812?

