

“THE MISFORTUNE TO GET PRESSED:”  
THE IMPRESSMENT OF AMERICAN SEAMEN AND THE  
RAMIFICATIONS ON THE UNITED STATES, 1793-1812

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## ABSTRACT

The impressment of American seamen by the Royal Navy was one of the most serious dilemmas faced by the United States during the early republic. Thousands of American citizens were forced into British naval service between 1793 and 1812. This dissertation uses a wide-variety of sources including seamen's letters, newspapers, almshouse records, US Navy officer's correspondence, and diplomatic communiqués, to demonstrate the widespread impact impressment had on American society.

A sizable database on impressed Americans was created for this dissertation. The database was instrumental in some of this work's most important theses. Drawing on an array of sources, such as newspaper reports, seamen appeals, and State Department reports, the database contains detailed information on thousands of men. Far more Americans were pressed in the Royal Navy than previously believed. While historians have long accepted that New England suffered most from impressment, in fact it was the mid-Atlantic states that lost the most mariners to the Royal Navy. Southern states were also impacted by impressment far more than anybody has realized.

Seaman abductions profoundly affected American domestic, foreign, and naval affairs. Impressment influenced American culture and played a role in the African slavery debate of the early republic. Impressment also exacted a heavy toll on waterfront communities as wives and children struggled to adjust to life during the prolonged absence of the primary wage earner. Although the federal government attempted repeatedly to either legislate or negotiate a resolution to the impressment issue, all efforts were in vain. When James Madison prepared to lead the United States to war against Great Britain in 1812, the belligerence of impressment figured largely in his decision, as

well as in Congressional support for war. Impressment has often been viewed as an issue of minor importance, confined largely to New England. In actuality, impressment was a national concern that impinged on a myriad of issues during the early American republic.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Joshua Davis was a native of Boston and a revolutionary. Davis served aboard the privateer *Jason* during America's War for Independence against Britain. In October 1779, the *Jason* was stalking merchantmen off the coast of Newfoundland when it was captured by the frigate HMS *Surprise*. The British made most of the *Jason's* crew prisoners of war, but Davis was forced to serve as a hand aboard the British man-of-war. He kept a daily journal while at sea. Davis recorded all the tribulations he faced as an impressed seaman aboard the *Surprise*. Once the American Revolution ended, Davis returned to Boston and his journal was packed away in a trunk, forgotten.

Then, in 1811, with tensions mounting between the United States and Great Britain and American seamen constantly facing the menace of Royal Navy press gangs, Davis dusted off his journal and published it as an impressment narrative. He spared no detail in recounting the tortures of life in the Royal Navy. Davis wrote of cruel officers who disregarded his American citizenship; ships' crews so ravaged by disease that men died nightly; and floggings that ripped away all the flesh from a seaman's back. Davis made it clear that survival aboard a British man-of-war was hard, but he had overcome the devastation of impressment. He offered practical advice to American sailors who might find themselves pressed into the Royal Navy. Once the press crew brought a seaman on board the ship and the British entered him in the books, he should find and befriend fellow Americans. If there were none aboard, Davis recommended attaching oneself to a kindly Briton, but no more than one. He further advised kidnapped Americans to do their duty, without protest or complaint, and win the good will of their officers and fellow crewmen. Only after a tar's good behavior earned the crew's trust,

should he look for a means of escape. As soon as an opportunity presented itself, the captive mariner should run “and finally get clear of these dens of horror, cruelty, confusion, and continual uproar.”<sup>1</sup>

Between 1793 and 1812, more than 15,000 American seamen suffered the same fate as Joshua Davis. When Davis published his narrative, the Anglo-American impressment controversy was nearly two decades old. Americans felt a renewed sense of urgency regarding their abducted sailors in 1811, though. American forbearance toward British belligerence on the high seas was drawing to a close. Davis’s story served as a timely reminder to the American people about the daily suffering their fellow citizens experienced aboard Royal Navy men-of-war. The shared experience of impressment undoubtedly motivated Davis to publicize his story and offer what guidance he could to future captives. One key difference distinguished Davis’s experiences from those of his target audience – the Royal Navy impressed him in 1780 off an American privateer during the Revolutionary War. The British perceived Davis as a rebellious subject when a press crew seized him. There was at least a legal pretense for his impressment. The men to whom Davis offered his wisdom were citizens of the United States. The Royal Navy had no right to force them into service.

Impressment ranked as one of the most important issues that the United States faced during its infancy. A myriad of other national concerns intertwined with the abduction of seamen. The impressment of American citizens accentuated questions of national sovereignty, citizenship, neutrality in European affairs, domestic security, and even the meaning of liberty in the age of revolution. Manstealing by the Royal Navy was

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Davis, *A Narrative of Joshua Davis, an American Citizen, Who Was Pressed and Served Aboard Six Ships of the British Navy: He Was in Seven Engagements, Once Wounded, Five Times Confined In Irons, and Obtained His Liberty By Desertion* (Boston: 1811), 18-68, quote 5.

a daunting political, diplomatic and social problem for the young American republic and it defied simple solution. The British had employed press gangs for centuries, and resistance to impressment in North America dated back at least four generations. If Americans possessed any advantage in the impressment controversy, it lay in their colonial antecedents. Impressment represented an important part of the United States' heritage.

Impressment was a prerogative of the crown. The practice had its foundation in feudalism, when the King of England required nobility who ruled over the Cinque ports (Dover, Sandwich, Hastings, Hythe, and New Romney) to provide ships and seamen whenever called upon to do so. Impressment became a common practice during the reign of King John I (1199-1216), who spent the majority of his rule trying to win back Normandy, Brest, and Anjou from France. Subsequent English monarchs also pressed seamen into service during times of war or national emergency. By the end of the seventeenth century, impressment became one of the primary means for manning a greatly enlarged Royal Navy. Great Britain endured a period of almost continual war between 1690 and 1815. During that period, the British pressed approximately 40 percent of all Royal Navy seamen into service. Britons resented impressment, particularly those who inhabited the seafaring towns frequented by press gangs. The subjects often resisted abduction and fought back against would-be captors. When the Royal Navy began impressing sailors in North America and the West Indies, the colonists likewise struggled against imperial authority.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The struggle against impressment in Great Britain has been related famously by J.R Hutchinson in *The Press Gang Afloat and Ashore* (1917; repr., London: Dodo Press, 2010 reprint); and more recently

Although isolated incidents of press-gang activity occurred in North America as early as the seventeenth century, it was not until the mid-eighteenth century that impressment had an impact on the lives of British colonists in a major way. Until the late 1740s, the British protected colonial seamen from coerced naval service by the 1708 Act for the Encourage of Trade in North America. The act was more commonly called the American Act or the Sixth of Anne, since it was the sixth act Parliament passed during Queen Anne's reign.<sup>3</sup>

The War of Spanish Succession necessitated the Sixth of Anne. During that conflict, the West Indies became the focal point of North American combat. The Royal Navy replaced lost manpower by pressing hands out of coasting vessels from the mainland colonies carrying supplies to British sugar islands. Mainland traders and seamen grew increasingly fearful of impressment and trading with the French islands in order to avoid the Royal Navy. Trading with the enemy upset British authorities, and the refusal of coastal traders to visit the British West Indies stalled the lucrative sugar trade. The sugar planter interest pressured Parliament to resolve the situation, which precipitated passage of the Sixth of Anne.<sup>4</sup> The act stated:

That no mariner or other person who shall serve on board or be retained to serve on board any privateer, or trading ship or vessel, that shall be employed in any part of America, nor any mariner or other person, being on shore in any part thereof, shall be liable to be impressed or taken away by any officer or officers of or belonging to any of her Majesty's ships of war impowered by the Lord High

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by Nicholas Rogers, *The Press Gang: Impressment and its Opponents in Georgian Britain* (London, England: Continuum Books, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Baugh, *British Naval Administration in the Age of Walpole* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 215-221.

<sup>4</sup> Baugh, *British Naval Administration*, 218; Dora Mae Clark, "The Impressment of Seamen in the American Colonies," in *Essays in Colonial History Presented to Charles McLean Andrews by his Students* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1931), 205-7.

Admiral, or any other person whatsoever, unless such mariner shall have before deserted from such ship of war.<sup>5</sup>

Parliament designed the American Act to protect and stimulate trade between the British mainland colonies and sugar islands. The common interpretation of the Sixth of Anne in the colonies, however, was that it abolished impressment in North America. In this regard, the Act was a success. Despite the fact that the Royal Navy increasingly faced a manning problem in America, particularly in the West Indies, the Admiralty stressed to its officers that they observe the Sixth of Anne. In fact, the Lords of the Admiralty advised Royal Navy captains to return to England to replace their losses rather than violate the Act. Recovering deserters proved difficult, too, as colonial governors invoked the Sixth of Anne to keep press crews out of their colonies' harbors.<sup>6</sup>

The Sixth of Anne contained one fateful flaw. The legislation failed to specify its expiration date. Colonists believed that the statute stood until Parliament repealed it. The Lords of the Admiralty thought the American Act remained in force only for the duration of the War of Spanish Succession – when the conflict concluded, so did the ban on impressment in North America. Because impressment was a wartime necessity, and because England was at peace for nearly three decades after 1714, these conflicting interpretations of the American Act went untested. In 1739, the War of Jenkins Ear, which sparked the larger War of the Austrian Succession (1740-48), forced the British government to face this issue in a definitive fashion. The Admiralty stopped ordering

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<sup>5</sup> “An Act for the Encouragement of Trade to America,” 1707, *Statutes of the Realm*, 6 Anne c. 64.

<sup>6</sup> Baugh, *British Naval Administration*, 218; Clark, “The Impressment of Seamen,” 205-8; Denver Brunsmann, “The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World,” (PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 2004), 98-99.

officers to respect the Sixth of Anne and the Royal Navy began to impress seamen in North America once more, particularly in the West Indies and Massachusetts colony. Sugar planters again lobbied Parliament to protect the valuable island trade. Parliament responded by reaffirming the tenets of the American Act in 1746, but specifically mentioned only the West Indies when it renewed the impressment ban.<sup>7</sup>

Both the Lords of the Admiralty and Royal Navy officers took the mainland colonies' omission from the ban to mean press crews could operate there freely. Because the 1746 renewal of the American Act did not clearly overturn the impressment ban on the mainland, colonists believed seamen were still protected under the 1708 statute. Conflicting interpretations of the Sixth of Anne produced violent clashes between Bostonians and Royal Navy personnel, most notoriously in the 1747 Knowles Riot.<sup>8</sup>

Captain Charles Knowles of the Royal Navy was the acting governor of Louisbourg, a fortified port on Cape Breton Island at the mouth of the St. Lawrence River that a New England amphibious force had captured from the French in 1745. Two years later, Knowles received a promotion to rear admiral and an appointment as commander-in-chief on the Jamaican station. Knowles sailed for the Caribbean Sea in October, but a severe storm damaged two ships in his fleet and forced the rest into Nantucket harbor. Knowles anchored in the island bay for more than a month as the damaged vessels

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<sup>7</sup> Baugh, *British Naval Administration*, 218-9; Clark, "The Impressment of Seamen," 211-4.

<sup>8</sup> Jesse Lemisch, *Jack Tar v. John Bull: The Role of New York's Seamen in Precipitating the Revolution* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1997), 20; Baugh, *British Naval Administration*, 218-21; Clark, "The Impressment of Seamen," 207-224; Brunsman, "The Evil Necessity," 99-106. Most historians agree that while Royal Navy officials, the Attorney General, and Solicitor General in England all concurred that the Sixth of Anne was only intended last the duration of the War of Spanish Succession, poor wording and mixed actions from Parliament more than justified colonists in believing that the act was still in effect as late as 1775. It was not until 1775 that Parliament explicitly repealed the colonial impressment ban; the need to repeal the American Act is proof positive that the provisions set forth in 1708 were still in effect nearly seven decades later. For the most comprehensive overview of the legitimacy of the Sixth of Anne, see Clark, 205-24.

underwent repairs. During that time, a significant number of seamen deserted Knowles' ships and escaped to Boston, leaving the admiral with crews so depleted that he could not continue his voyage south. On the night of November 16, Knowles ordered press gangs to Boston to recover deserters and impress as many seamen as necessary to fill his fleet's complement. Knowles' minions seized dozens of men along the waterfront, some of them deserters. The press gangs did not discriminate, however, and they grabbed a number of local sailors, carpenters apprentices, and stevedores. The British press crew hurled their unfortunate captives back to the vessels anchored in Nantucket harbor.<sup>9</sup>

By dawn on November 17, roughly 300 Boston seamen had gathered at the city's wharfs to protest the previous nights' abductions. The crowd's demand was simple – release the men stolen by Knowles' press crews. The protestors decided the best way to pressure Knowles was to detain British officers returning to the fleet. They seized a lieutenant, intimidating him with threats. Thomas Hutchinson, a future Massachusetts governor, encountered the growing mob during this altercation.<sup>10</sup>

Hutchinson was then the Speaker of the House in the General Court, the colony's legislative body. He became a major player in the Knowles Riot that tumultuous November. First he persuaded the crowd to release the lieutenant, whom Hutchinson knew had nothing to do with the impressments. The crowd acceded to Hutchinson's request. The mob continued to swell, however, and demanded justice. Hutchinson hurried to Governor William Shirley's home and warned him of the angry mob headed

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<sup>9</sup> John Lax and William Pencak, "The Knowles Riot and the Crisis of the 1740's in Massachusetts," in *Perspectives in American History*, v. 10, ed. Bernard Bailyn (Cambridge, MA: Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History at Harvard University, 1976), 163-64, 182-84; Brunsman, "Evil Necessity," 248-51.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Province of Massachusetts-Bay, From the Charter of King William and Queen Mary in 1691 Until the Year 1750*, Vol. 2 (London: J. Smith, 1768), 431; Lax and Pencak, "The Knowles Riot," 186-87.

there to demand satisfaction for the abductions. Several of Knowles' officers had been staying with Shirley and they quickly armed themselves. Once again, Hutchinson helped to defuse the situation, but not before the mob roughed up a deputy sheriff when he attempted to disperse it.

By dusk, thousands of adult males had gathered to renew the protest, including many prominent members of the community. The crowd had moved from the governor's home to the General Court, where it once again succumbed to an ugly mood. After the rioters stormed inside the building, Thomas Hutchinson and other members of the general assembly intervened to stop throngs of people from breaking into the council chamber. Evincing sympathy for the mob's grievances, Hutchinson spoke with its leaders and agreed to take their demands to Governor Shirley. What the protestors wanted was simple enough – the release of all impressed Bostonians and foreign seamen who were not deserters from Knowles' fleet.<sup>11</sup>

The mob had reached the brink of violence three times and each time cooler heads had prevailed. Knowles had given no sign he would release the pressed men and the crowd needed to vent some anger. After leaving the General Court, the masses returned to the waterfront. There the people seized a barge they believed belonged to Knowles. The mob carried the vessel to Shirley's house and prepared to set it on fire. Cooler heads persuaded the throng to move the barge to Boston Common where there was little danger of accidentally harming any nearby buildings, and burned it there. That the craft actually belonged to a man in the mob is insignificant. Bostonians believed they had destroyed a boat owned by the Royal Navy. By supposedly destroying the property of the king, Bostonians meant to issue a direct challenge to the crown's authority. Putting the barge

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<sup>11</sup> Hutchinson, *History of the Province of Massachusetts*, 431-33.

to flame demonstrated the crown's relative impotent and asserted the supremacy of local rule in the colonies. William Legge, Earl of Dartmouth, and Secretary of State for the Colonies from 1772-75, called the burning of Royal Navy small craft "high treason, viz: levying war against the King."<sup>12</sup> Colonists continued torching small boats and barges of the Royal Navy in response to impressment for the next twenty-five years.

The bonfire on Boston Common culminated the first day's rioting. The mob continued to dictate affairs in Boston over the next two days. On November 18, Governor Shirley called out the militia, but the Boston companies refused to muster. The city's male population totaled approximately 8,000. If the crowd numbered several thousand male Bostonians on the second day, a majority of the city's militiamen had joined the demonstration.<sup>13</sup> Shirley withdrew to Castle William, the island fortress, in Boston harbor and sent a message to Admiral Knowles imploring him to release the pressed locals to restore order to the city. Knowles refused to return anybody until all of his officers rejoined the fleet. He also threatened to bring his men-of-war into Boston Harbor and bombard the city to quell the riot. Meanwhile, the General Court refused to take any action against the mob. The legislators hoped their inaction would discourage any other Royal Navy officers from sending press gangs into Boston in the future. If colonial officials made it clear that the Navy could expect no help in quelling such popular uprisings, ship captains would have to question if pressing was worth the trouble to gain a few able hands.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 231.

<sup>13</sup> Lax and Pencak, "The Knowles Riot," 190-1.

<sup>14</sup> Hutchinson, *History of the Province of Massachusetts*, 332.

On the afternoon of November 19, after another full day of rioting, the General Court called a town meeting. There the people of Boston voiced their continued disdain for Knowles' impressment campaign, but also condemned the mob – a mob many of them had either joined or supported. The Knowles Riot was over. All the truant Royal Navy officers returned to the fleet, Admiral Knowles released the majority of men swept up by his press crew and his ships sailed for the West Indies. The Knowles Riot was the longest anti-impressment demonstration to rock the colonies, but it is significant for more than that reason. The people of Boston had violently resisted the authority of the Royal Navy, denied Parliament the right to infringe on their rights as free people, and largely succeeded. Historians John Lax and William Pencak credited the Knowles Riot with radicalizing a young Samuel Adams, who came to recognize the significance of the crowds' actions in the months that followed. Adams explained in his short-lived newspaper, *The Independent Advertiser*, that colonial authorities should consider the mob “an Assembly of the People drawn together . . . to defend themselves.” The people of Boston acted upon “the natural right which every Man had and every Company of Men have to repel those Mischiefs against which they can derive no security from the Government.”<sup>15</sup>

The Knowles Riot was not Boston's first clash with a press gang, nor was it the city's last. Several more intense confrontations over impressment occurred over the decades preceding the Revolution. The most notable was the *Liberty* riot and the clash between HMS *Rose* and the *Pitt Packet*. The *Liberty* riot of 1768 began when customs

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<sup>15</sup> Marcus Rediker, “A Motley Crew of Rebels: Sailors, Slaves, and the Coming of the American Revolution,” in *The Transforming Hand of Revolution: Reconsidering the American Revolution as a Social Movement*, eds., Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1995) 161-63; Lax and Pencak, 201-214; *The Independent Advertiser*, 8 February 1748, quoted in Lax and Pencak, “The Knowles Riot,” 207.

officials seized John Hancock's sloop, *Liberty*, for smuggling Madeira wine into the colony. For three days, the people of Boston beat customs officials, threatened their houses, and burned a collection boats on the Common. For many years, historians viewed these disturbances as stemming simply from resistance to the Navigation Acts. Recently, historians have acknowledged the existence of underlying tensions between Bostonians and the Royal Navy as a key impetus in the mob's actions. HMS *Romney* had been impressing local seamen from outbound vessels. This was a cardinal sin that left merchant ships dangerously undermanned at the beginning of a voyage and had the potential to bring shipping to a standstill. Thus when *Romney* moved against the *Liberty*, the anger directed against Crown officials had been building for more than a week.<sup>16</sup>

The confrontation between HMS *Rose* and the *Pitt Packet* occurred almost a year later, on April 22, 1769. A press crew boarded the *Pitt Packet*, an inbound merchant vessel. Once aboard, the officer in charge of the press, Lieutenant Henry Panton, only two of the *Pitt Packet*'s six seamen mustered for him. Panton and his subordinates discovered the four missing sailors barricaded inside the ship's forepeak. Determined to avoid impressment, the fortified mariners clutched weapons. Panton tried to coax the men into coming out, but then tried to intimidate them a show of force by gathering his entire press crew outside the forepeak. Finally, Panton decided to personally retrieve the men from the hold, despite multiple warnings from the barricaded seamen that they would kill first man to approach them. When Panton drew near, one of the cornered sailors stabbed him in the neck with a harpoon, cutting his jugular vein, and he quickly

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<sup>16</sup> Dirk Hoerder, *Crowd Action in Revolutionary Massachusetts, 1765-1780* (New York: Academic Press, 1977), 164-70; Pauline Maier, *From Resistance to Revolution: Colonial Radicals and the Development of American Opposition to Britain, 1765-1776* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 124-26; Benjamin Carp, *Rebels Rising: Cities and the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42-50.

died. Eventually, the four seamen surrendered and were arrested for murder.<sup>17</sup> John Adams and John Otis agreed to defend the seamen and Adams based his clients' defense on the Sixth of Anne and the unconstitutional nature of impressment. Before Adams could present his clients' case, however, Chief Justice (and Lieutenant Governor) Thomas Hutchinson declared the four sailors not guilty. Adams believed Hutchinson did not allow the trial to proceed because the lieutenant governor feared a judgment against the defendants. A violent response from Bostonians was likely if the Court handed down such a ruling.<sup>18</sup>

Inhabitants in other colonial port cities and towns exercised the same form of self-defense when faced with Royal Navy press gangs and helped to establish a pattern of violent resistance to imperial incursion. Newport, Rhode Island was the site of two large scale confrontations between colonists and British naval authority. In July 1764, HMS *St. John* anchored in Newport harbor. *St. John* was steadily losing men to desertion, like most naval vessels lingering near land too long. Captain Benjamin Hill sent a press tender ashore to recover deserters and press enough able hands to bring his crew to full strength. When the press gang arrived at the wharf, a large crowd of seamen and dock workers hurled stones at the would-be captors. The *Newport Mercury* described the incident as "a smart skirmish" and the waterfront laborers forced the press crew to retreat back to *St. John*. The gang seized ten local seamen, but the crowd managed to capture the lieutenant leading the press. The Newport community resolved to recover the ten men and boarded boats with the intention of boarding the frigate. Somebody leading the

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<sup>17</sup> "Journal of Occurrences," *New York Journal*, 22 June 1769; Hoerder, *Crowd Action*, 199-201.

<sup>18</sup> John Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, vol. 2, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: 1856), 343-352.

crowd must have realized the improbability of success and instead the demonstrators rowed out to Fort George and manned the cannons. The guns at Fort George fired ten shots at *St. John* to prevent Captain Hill from taking his ship out of the harbor. At that point, Captain Richard Smith of HMS *Squirrel* intervened. Smith was Hill's superior and a respected figure in Newport. He negotiated an exchange of the pressed locals for the captured lieutenant, after which *St. John* left Newport harbor.<sup>19</sup>

A year later in June 1765, Newport once again succumbed to the furor created by Royal Navy press tenders prowling the city's harbor. HMS *Myrmidon* had been patrolling the harbor and pressing one able hand from every inbound vessel, although no local seamen. The people of Newport tolerated the ship's continued presence, even if they were dismayed by it. By June, *Myrmidon* had sailed away and HMS *Maidstone* arrived. Rumor spread in Newport that *Maidstone* had been impressing local fishermen in more distant waters, which caused tension. When *Maidstone* impressed every seamen out of an inbound vessel from Jamaica, including several locals, the city erupted. A mob of nearly 500, described by the local newspaper as principally seamen, boys, and Negroes, swarmed to the docks and seized *Maidstone*'s tender. The crowd carried the boat to the town common and burned it. Captain Charles Antrobus, *Maidstone*'s commander, insisted the leaders of the mob be taken into custody, but local authorities never moved to arrest any of the participants. Instead, Governor Samuel Ward demanded that Antrobus release any Rhode Islanders serving against their will aboard *Maidstone*.<sup>20</sup>

New York City ranked second only to Boston in the number of seamen impressed during the colonial era. In fact, the largest sweep by a press gang in North America

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<sup>19</sup> *Newport Mercury*, 16 July 1764; Linebaugh and Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra*, 218.

<sup>20</sup> *Newport Mercury*, 10 June 1765; Rediker, "Motley Crew," 169-70.

occurred in New York in May 1757. The Royal Navy seized almost 800 men, a quarter of the city's entire male population, to serve in an expedition against Louisbourg. The British eventually released more than half of these unfortunates, but that did little to ease tensions created by the hot press. In 1758, a press gang boarded an incoming merchant ship and found four sailors prepared to fight rather than submit to naval service. The men had armed themselves with blunderbusses inside a barricaded cabin. They opened fire when their would-be-captors approached too close, killing one member of the gang. Two years later, the crew of a merchant vessel exchanged shots with a gang aboard a press tender, as the former fought to keep the latter off of their ship. The Royal Navy mariners killed a merchant seaman and wounded another in the skirmish.<sup>21</sup>

An even deadlier confrontation occurred off New York later that same year. HMS *Winchester* sent a press crew out to board the merchant vessel *Sampson* as the trader arrived in New York's harbor from Lisbon. The inbound ship refused to back sail and haul-to for the press boat, despite numerous signals and warning shots from the frigate. When the *Winchester's* boat approached the *Sampson* in an attempt to board her, the merchant seamen, armed with pistols and muskets, began to fire deadly volleys at the press gang. The defiant sailors ignored cries to desist and the firing continued, even as the boat tried to pull away and return to *Winchester*. Three men from *Winchester* were killed outright and another mortally wounded. The crew of the *Sampson* quickly dispersed upon reaching New York and the only men taken into custody for the killings were the ship's captain and first mate, who were later released.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Brunsmann, "The Evil Necessity," 262-3; Gary Nash, *Urban Crucible: The Northern Seaports and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 138-44.

Finally in 1764, New York City witnessed its own impressment riot. HMS *Chaleur* had been patrolling the waters around New York during the first week of July in hopes of pressing a few able hands from inbound traders. On July 11, Lieutenant Thomas Langhorne, commander of *Chaluer*, spotted five vessels anchored together in Long Island Sound and sent a press crew to take from the ships any hands that could be spared. In the end, the press took one man was taken from each ship. The next morning, Langhorne took his moses-boat (a small personal boat used in shallow waters) to Manhattan and encountered an angry mob. Langhorne had moved men from fishing boats the night before, craft which were traditionally considered off limits. Langhorne apologized for the confusion and agreed to the crowd's demands that he release the men. The lieutenant wrote a note to his first mate to that effect, but it failed to appease the crowd. The throng seized Langhorne's boat and dragged it through the streets to City Hall, where they burned it.<sup>23</sup> While New Yorkers distracted themselves with their bonfire, Langhorne slipped away and returned to *Chaluer*.

Community action against Royal Navy impressment, such as that which jolted Boston, Newport, and New York, was not confined to the northern ports. Charleston, South Carolina, witnessed an ugly dust-up in 1741. HMS *Tartar* anchored in Charleston and in desperate need of seamen for a voyage across the Atlantic. A heavily armed press gang boarded the merchant ship *Caesar*, whose outmatched hands surrendered. At that point, Samuel Batters, master of *Tartar*, killed James Radford, a crewman from the *Caesar*. This outraged Charleston's waterfront community – seamen and merchants alike

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<sup>22</sup> *New York Mercury*, 25 August 1760; *New York Gazette*, 25 August 1760; *New York Gazette*, 1 September 1760.

<sup>23</sup> Lemisch, *Jack Tar vs. John Bull*, 26-8; Brunsman, "The Evil Necessity," 262.

demanded justice. The South Carolina General Assembly issued a warrant for Batters' arrest on the charge of murder. Batters managed to elude authorities until he reached London. There the Admiralty detained him, but the Solicitor General ruled Batters' trial should be held in South Carolina. He was taken into custody to await transport to Charleston. As it turned out, however, Batters received a Royal Pardon before the Navy transported him across the Atlantic, despite strong petitioning from South Carolina's merchants that he stand trial.<sup>24</sup>

The people of Norfolk, Virginia, mobilized to resist the intrusion of a Royal Navy press gang into their community. On September 5, 1767, Captain Jeremiah Morgan of HMS *Hornet* personally led a gang of more than thirty officers and men into Norfolk. Morgan hoped to avoid upsetting the more respectable people of Norfolk and confined the activities of his party to taverns frequented by seamen. The mayor of Norfolk, George Albyvon, later insisted Morgan and his men entered the private homes of many seamen, knocked them about the head and dragged them from bed and into the street. The city took alarm and local authorities hurried to the waterfront, led initially by magistrate Paul Loyal, who confronted Morgan. Captain Morgan was not pleased with the interference and he conducted a heated exchange with Loyal. Morgan grew so angry that he drew his sword and threatened to run Loyal through. Mayor Albyvon arrived at the wharves with more than a hundred men in tow to ensure no Norfolk residents ended up aboard *Hornet*. Even more incensed, Morgan ordered his men aboard the tender to fire on the crowd. When Morgan's crew hesitated to follow his command, Albyvon ordered Morgan arrested. Morgan fled to *Hornet* in such haste that he left behind several members of his

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<sup>24</sup> *London Magazine and Monthly Chronicle, 1742* (London), 462-63; *London Magazine and Monthly Chronicle, 1743* (London), 49.

press gang. Mayor Albyvon had the press gang members taken into custody, but they were later released in exchange for impressed locals held aboard *Hornet*. The people of Norfolk avoided bloodshed in their confrontation with the press gang, but it had been a near thing.<sup>25</sup>

Colonial opposition to Royal Navy press gangs helped establish a pattern of resistance to imperial authority in general. Two decades before Bostonians dumped tea in Boston harbor, they burned press tenders on Boston Common. The Sons of Neptune organized to protect seamen from press gangs years before the Sons of Liberty came into being.<sup>26</sup> This is not to suggest that historians should consider impressment a fundamental cause of the American Revolution. Many other factors contributed to the split between the thirteen colonies and Great Britain. Impressment was just one of them and its importance ebbed as colonists grew more indignant over the Parliamentary acts issued between 1764 and 1774. Still, impressment was an important part of the United States' recent colonial past. It was capable of uniting urban colonists and eliciting a passionate response from them.

This dissertation studies impressment during the early republic era in the United States. It adopts a multifaceted approach to demonstrate that the violent seizure of American seamen by the Royal Navy was a crucial issue facing the United States at the turn of the nineteenth century. Impressment posed a relentless problem, the consequences of which threatened far more than just captive seamen. It destabilized

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<sup>25</sup> *Virginia Gazette*, 6 September 1767.

<sup>26</sup> For more on the Sons of Neptune, see Paul Gilje, *Liberty of the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 97-129.

waterfront communities, antagonized officers of the United States Navy, and helped shape popular culture. Impressment profoundly influenced Anglo-American relations, as well. The Jay Treaty, Orders in Council, the Monroe-Pinkney Treaty, Jefferson's Embargo, and other key issues, were all affected in some way by the inability of the United States and Great Britain to reach an accord ending or limiting what Americans increasingly defined as manstealing. The failure to resolve the impressment controversy became a vital element in the causality of the War of 1812. The truth is that impressment was far from "a humdrum affair," as prominent British scholar N.A.M. Rodger once described it.<sup>27</sup> This dissertation proves that impressment mattered.

Impressment occupies a unique place in historiography. Historians are interested in the subject, but almost always treat it obliquely. Seaman abductions are often folded into larger works on the life of eighteenth and nineteenth-century sailors, or the War of 1812. Scholars have rarely considered impressment worthy of a book-length study. There are only four monographs that have made impressment their subject of inquiry; J.R. Hutchinson's *The Press Gang, Afloat and Ashore* (1913), James F. Zimmerman's *Impressment of American Seamen* (1925), Nicholas Rogers *The Press Gang: Impressment and its Opponents in Georgian Britain* (2007), and, most recently, Denver Brunzman's *The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (2013).

Hutchinson argued that impressment was an inherently violent institution that was necessarily resisted by force. Hutchinson acknowledged Great Britain's manpower needs in order to have a fully functional navy, but he also believed that the means the

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<sup>27</sup> N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London: Collins, 1986), 182.

Royal Navy adopted the wrong means to obtain and retained seamen. The solution to the Royal Navy's recruitment problem lay in better pay and improved working conditions, not belligerence and abuse. Hutchinson examined various aspects of impressment, including how press gangs operated and the means by which seamen evaded abduction. Decades before bottom-up social history became popular, he attempted to assess the hardships faced by women in waterfront communities hard-hit by impressment.<sup>28</sup>

Nicholas Rogers focused more narrowly on the opposition impressment faced in Britain. He studied more than 600 *mêlées* occasioned by press-gangs rounding up their quarry. Rogers argued that Britons' violent response to impressment represents a unique form of collective protest in early-modern Europe. Rogers also demonstrated that while the Anglo-French wars at the turn of the nineteenth century are often viewed as key to the development of a British national identity, historians cannot apply that argument to waterfront communities. At the end of the Napoleonic Wars, British seamen felt abandoned and frustrated. Rogers explained that the tars' bitterness derived in no small part from impressment.<sup>29</sup>

Most recently, Denver Brunzman examined the role impressment played in helping to forge, maintain, and nearly destroy the first British Empire. The might of Great Britain rested on the Royal Navy's dominance of the seas. Naval supremacy allowed the British to gain control of much of North America, including the valuable West Indies sugar islands, as well as large parts of India, the southern tip of Africa, and establish footholds in Australia, South America, and southeast Asia. Equally important, the Royal Navy's dominance secured British trade routes, which helped make England's

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<sup>28</sup> Hutchinson, *Impressment Afloat and Ashore*.

<sup>29</sup> Rogers, *The Press Gang*.

economy the strongest in Europe. The backbone of the Royal Navy was its skilled seamen, at least 40 percent of whom were forced into the service against their will. Brunnsman argued that the surprising fact about the press-gang system is that it worked so well. A combination of professional pride, camaraderie among sailors, and harsh discipline helped ensure coerced seamen served admirably. The Royal Navy became too reliant on impressment and began to violate what Brunnsman calls, the “impressment culture.” This was particularly true in North America, where impressment of colonials spurred collective action against the British crown, which helped set the stage for the American Revolution.<sup>30</sup>

James Zimmerman’s account is an important review of the legal and diplomatic debates surrounding the Royal Navy’s impressment of American citizens. He advanced a straightforward thesis – conflicting legal doctrine over American citizenship lay at the root of the impressment controversy. The United States and Great Britain entertained opposing views on naturalization and expatriation. Zimmerman explained the effect of impressment on Anglo-American relations, focusing on the Adams and Jefferson administrations. He was the first historian to study U.S. State Department records on impressment, but Zimmerman concentrated almost entirely on the reports made by the agents for impressed sailors. His treatment of the impressment of American seamen is still considered to be the best, evinced by the fact that so many historians reference Zimmerman’s research.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Denver Brunnsman, *The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2013).

<sup>31</sup> James F. Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen* (1925; repr., Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1966).

In addition to the aforementioned books, there are three unpublished dissertations written on impressment. Keith Mercer analyzed the impact of impressment on civil-military relations in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. Impressment proved impossible for the Royal Navy in Nova Scotia, but in Newfoundland, press gangs worked in unison with the colonial government and provided the Royal Navy with thousands of men. Mercer believed that the origin of each colony's settlers explain the divergent attitudes towards impressment. The transplanted New Englanders who populated Nova Scotia brought with them a history of resistance to press gangs. Newfoundland, on the other hand, was settled by Englishmen and Scots, who inherently accepted impressment as an obligation to their British allegiance.<sup>32</sup>

Scott Thomas Jackson studied the role of impressment in the growing friction between the United States and Great Britain in the years 1787-1818. Jackson's study is essentially an expansion of Zimmerman's work. Jackson concentrated on the effect impressment had on Anglo-American diplomacy, but he begins his study ten years earlier than Zimmerman. Jackson also gives a more thorough review to impressment during the Madison administration. He argued that the United States and Great Britain based foreign policy decisions relative to impressment on national interest. Essentially, it was advantageous for Great Britain to cull as many able seamen from American merchant vessels as possible. The Royal Navy needed the manpower to defeat France. Likewise, it was in the United States' interest to protect sailors (even those of dubious citizenship) working the trans-Atlantic trade routes. The young nation's fragile economy received a significant boost from the carrying trade. The two countries' strict adherence to national

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<sup>32</sup> Keith Mercer, "North Atlantic Press Gangs: Impressment and Naval-Civilian Relations in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, 1749-1815" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Dalhousie University, 2008).

interests made a compromise on impressment impossible and led inevitably to armed conflict.<sup>33</sup>

Most recently, Claire Phelan has attempted to depict the experience of impressment from the viewpoint of American seamen. Phelan employed some powerful anecdotes to convey the hardships endured by impressed sailors and their loved ones left behind. Unfortunately, her dissertation lacked focus. By the conclusion, Phelan seemed more interested in justifying the Royal Navy's actions while laying the blame for impressment at the feet of the American government. Phelan claimed the United States was not interested in finding a solution to the impasse created by British press gangs. She drew on too few diplomatic sources, however, to justify such an argument. In all, it was a disappointing piece of scholarship.<sup>34</sup>

These seven works represent the leading scholarship on impressment. Most of the studies were admirable, but there is considerable room for growth. Hutchinson and Rogers examined impressment in Britain, while Mercer focused on Canada. Brunsmann offered an Atlantic world perspective, but relied heavily on Great Britain and Ireland. Only Zimmerman and Jackson offer strong scholarship on impressment in America, but both historians concerned themselves primarily with the practice's effect on foreign relations. Additionally, Zimmerman's work is nearly a century old, while Jackson completed his dissertation four decades ago. This dissertation fills a large gap in the historiography by offering a comprehensive, new assessment of impressment in the early American republic.

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<sup>33</sup> Scott Thomas Jackson, "Impressment and Anglo-American Discord," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Michigan, 1976).

<sup>34</sup> Claire Phelan, "In the Vice of Empire: British Impressment of the American Sailor," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Texas Christian University, 2008).

Chapter two opens the work by explaining why the Royal Navy abducted American seamen. Citizenship, naturalization, and power figure prominently in the answer. A statistical and demographic analysis of impressed seamen follows. I created a database for impressed seamen, consisting of information garnered from State Department records, the Silas Talbot papers, consular letters, and newspaper reports. This approach uncovers certain trends in impressment, including when and where press gangs were most likely to operate. The data reveals that the British pressed a greater number of mariners off American vessels than previously supposed. The majority of scholars have long adhered to James Zimmerman's estimate of 10,000, but this dissertation indicates that the figure was significantly higher. Finally, the dissertation examines the sailors themselves, and in so doing lay to rest the misconception that impressment most heavily impacted New Englanders. Although Massachusetts tars suffered their share of hardship at British hands, impressment's effect on the rest of New England was mild. The mid-Atlantic states were home to most impressment victims. The South also had a considerable number of mariners carried off by the Royal Navy. Impressment, far from being a regional dilemma, was a national concern.

Chapter three pushes past the demographics of impressment and looks at the lived experience of abducted seamen. Service in the Royal Navy proved unpleasant for nearly everybody; harsh discipline, low pay (usually in arrears), perpetual service, and rampant disease were common complaints. The dangers of war only added to the daily miseries. Sailors forced into the Royal Navy faced additional hardship. The British coerced American citizens into a military to which they had no obligation and forced them to fight France, a nation which was not their enemy. Ideology aside, captive American tars

faced more practical challenges, as well. If a Yankee sailor refused to serve, some British captains went to extreme lengths to coerce them. A pressed American seaman could receive no pay, because as soon as he accepted wages, the Royal Navy considered him a volunteer and ineligible for release as a wrongfully impressed man. American tars were routinely denied shore leave for fear that they would desert the Royal Navy. These men were kept from their homes and their friends and families for years. American seamen believed themselves to be the embodiment of American liberty, but they learned that the ideology of liberty was powerless in the face of British press gangs.

Seamen were not the only American victims of impressment. The prolonged captivity of so many men necessarily impinged on domestic affairs. Chapter four explores some of impressment's ramifications in the waterfront communities of the United States. The prolonged absence of wage-earning males could devastate wives and children left at home. In New York City, poverty forced families unable to survive without a seaman's wages to turn to various forms of public assistance. Communities such as Southwark, Pennsylvania, and New London, Connecticut, which experienced heavy losses in their seafaring men, also witnessed sharp increases in their child mortality rates. Newspaper reports and popular culture conveyed impressment's attendant tragedies to the public. Broadside ballads, poems, and plays regularly portrayed the suffering of seamen and their loved ones. Some of the most influential newspapers likewise rallied to the cause of captive seamen. Popular culture and partisan journalism were crucial in spreading knowledge of impressment and its repercussions to the masses.

The American people's growing awareness of their fellow citizens' anguish created a groundswell of support to end impressment. The populace increasingly

demanded that the Federal government resolve the impressment issue. The public manifested their insistence with petitions to Congress, memorials to the president, appeals to the State Department, and letters to individual congressmen. The pressure the American people applied to the national government and its response is the topic of chapter five. The United States mounted a concerted effort to find an effective means of ending impressment. The Adams and Jefferson administrations tried multiple times to reach an accord with Great Britain, but to no avail. Congress, meanwhile, attempted to legislate away the problem. Unfortunately, United States law had no hold on the Royal Navy. American efforts to end impressment fizzled, largely due to British intransigence. The failure to find a resolution to impressment severely strained Anglo-American relations.

The tension between the nations extended to their militaries, as well, particularly their navies. Twice that tension snapped in violent ways. The *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair is the most infamous example of US-British volatility. Historians are familiar with the important role impressment played in the *Chesapeake* affair, but chapter six delves deeper into the United States Navy's relationship with impressment. Impressment frustrated navy officers, who viewed the practice as an affront to their personal honor. Anger among naval commanders increased steadily. Royal Navy belligerence in American waters after 1803 all but assured a response from US Navy leadership. The US Navy did not directly confront its British counterpart at first, but instead adopted a stance of non-cooperation. This passive-aggressive approach helped lay the groundwork for the British attack on the USS *Chesapeake*. In the wake of Jefferson's Embargo, passions were still running high. US Navy officers abandoned their indirect methods of dealing

with the British and started actively pursuing a confrontation. The end result was the USS *President*'s devastating attack on HMS *Little Belt*. Anglo-American rapport was fragile, particularly after the peace of Amiens ended. The US and Royal navies' clashes over impressment hastened the deterioration of the countries' relationship and pushed them closer and closer to war.

By 1811, President Madison began to prepare for war as the situation between the United States and Great Britain worsened. Historians have relegated to secondary status the place of impressment in Madison and the Republicans' final decision to declare war on Great Britain. Chapter seven argues for the primacy of impressment. Madison listed impressment as the first grievance against Great Britain in his war message to Congress. John C. Calhoun, in the House Foreign Relations Committee's response supporting the president, emphasized how detrimental impressment was to the United States. Newspapers and public memorials urging war in the fall of 1811 and the spring of 1812 routinely cited seaman abductions as a reason for hostilities. The public rallied to the cause by cries of "Free Trade and Sailors' Rights!" While the causality of the War of 1812 was complex and multifaceted, impressment lurked in the background of every Anglo-American dispute. Far from being a justification for war, impressment functioned as a driving force behind the conflict.

The War of 1812 lasted more than two years. The Treaty of Ghent ended hostilities. American and British peace commissioners agreed to the accords in December 1814 and by April 1815, the fighting had ceased. The peace agreement contained no measure concerning impressment. The last chapter demonstrates why the American delegation at Ghent abandoned the issue of seaman abductions during

negotiations. It then examines the place of impressment in the post war American consciousness. Impressment continued to loom large in United States' society, particularly in popular culture. Americans' deep-seeded Anglophobia ensured that past British transgressions were not forgotten until domestic affairs overwhelmed any other concerns.

The chapters that follow approach the captivity of mariners almost strictly from the American perspective. The primary concern of my research is how impressment affected the United States. This dissertation does not dwell on British justifications regarding the legality or necessity of impressment. I present the principal validations of British leaders, but only to illustrate how their rationale affected American reactions to seaman abductions. The works of J.R. Hutchinson, Nicholas Rogers, Denver Brunsmann, and N.A.M. Rodger amply present the British perspective on impressment. This dissertation presents the other side of the coin.

Impressment was an ever present issue during the period of the early American republic. The abduction of seamen was invasive – socially, culturally, diplomatically, militarily, and politically. A life of captivity in the Royal Navy visited devastating hardships on its victims, and it was equally disruptive to their families in the United States. The passions impressment excited in the American populace waxed and waned over two decades, but Americans continually displayed concern for the plight of their fellow citizens. The United States government failed to fashion any effective measure to end impressment, despite making numerous attempts. Neither Congress nor the State Department managed to curtail the aggression of the Royal Navy. The simmering tensions between the United States and Great Britain boiled over twice in armed clashes

on the high seas, which caused a further deterioration in Anglo-American relations. By 1811, the strain between the two nations had escalated to the point that President Madison prepared the United States for hostilities with Great Britain. In the summer of 1812, American restraint *vis-à-vis* British antagonism reached an end and Congress declared war. Impressment underlay almost every development on the road to war.

CHAPTER TWO:  
“NO PRECISE OR ACCURATE VIEW:”  
THE HISTORY AND DEMOGRAPHICS OF IMPRESSMENT IN THE EARLY  
REPUBLIC

David Rumsey was an anxious father and irate citizen when he wrote to Speaker of the House of Representatives Nathaniel Macon in 1805. Rumsey’s son, Stephen, had been impressed in the West Indies aboard HMS *Amelia*. For nearly a year Rumsey attempted to secure his son’s release by repeatedly providing proof of Stephen’s citizenship, but to no avail. Rumsey’s frustration led him to send an angry missive to Congress. “I hope our Honorable Congress in their Present Secion will Do sumthing for the protection of their subjects and not Let all Europe take them and Due what they please with them.” Rumsey clearly felt that the Federal government was not acting vigorously enough to end impressment. He also wondered if his many personal sacrifices during the Revolution had been worth the price: “If this is all the Liberty I have gained to be Bereaved of my Children . . . and they made slaves I had Rather been without it. I hope that Congress will take sum speedy methods to Relieve our poor Distressed Children from under their Wicked Hands whose tenderest manners is Cruelty.” Finally, Rumsey questioned how many men suffered as his son did, and why the United States took no action on their behalf. “How many of our Americans have lost their lives and Happiness as at Tripoli . . . and why Don’t we Refute their [the British] Violations when we have Evidence of it?”<sup>1</sup>

Rumsey represents many Americans in the early republic who raised questions about impressment. Although newspapers kept the public as informed as possible about

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<sup>1</sup> David Rumsey to Nathaniel Macon, letter, 28 December 1805; Stephen Rumsey file; Entry 928 letters of impressed seamen, Records relating to impressed seamen, 1794-1815, Miscellaneous Records, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

American seamen's captivity by the Royal Navy, the particulars of impressment were elusive, not just for the American people, but for everybody involved. Two centuries later, historians still struggle to understand the details of impressment.

Many misconceptions and generalizations confuse or simplify the impressment issue. Discovering the answers to some of the most basic questions about the abduction of Americans provides a firm foundation for discussing the topic. This chapter aims to answer the following: 1) How many Americans did the Royal Navy impress in the two decades preceding the War of 1812? An exact number may never be attainable, but a reasonable estimate can be arrived at by combing through a variety of sources, particularly the State Department records on impressment seamen, the papers of American relief agents, and newspaper reports. 2) Where did these men come from – what cities and towns did they call home? Seamen's work made them transients, but many also had families and were rooted in specific places to which they returned at the end of their voyages. 3) Where did British press gangs seize American seamen? Obviously, no press gangs roamed the streets of post-Revolutionary Boston or New York, but British men-of-war did cruise the waters and shipping channels of the United States' biggest cities. Often seamen had to sail into the lion's den, as well, voyaging to London and the West Indies. 4) When were American seamen most likely to fall into the hands of the Royal Navy? Nearly twenty years passed between 1793, when the Royal Navy began seizing American tars, and the outbreak of the War of 1812. Learning which years were most dangerous for an American sailor might reveal how domestic and foreign affairs affected impressment and vice versa. Historians have largely accepted that impressments subsided after the embargo in 1808, but does that argument hold water? 5)

Finally, why were American seamen being pressed by the Royal Navy in the first place? The Royal Navy began impressing American seamen again in 1793. The simple reason is that Great Britain needed more manpower, but the easy answer is rarely sufficient. The United States and Great Britain had ideological differences and divergent interests which motivated Anglo-American discord over impressment.

The French Revolution began in 1789 and thrust Europe into turmoil. Between the Revolution, the Coalition Wars, and the Wars of Napoleon, it took nearly three decades for peace to return to the continent. The most consistent belligerents in these conflicts were France and Great Britain. British strategy revolved around the Royal Navy throughout much of the fighting. Naval supremacy and blockade was surest path to victory.<sup>2</sup> Such a protracted approach hinged on one important requirement – having enough seamen to man the ships of the Royal Navy. The manpower required by the Admiralty ballooned from 16,000 sailors in 1792 to 120,000 five years later, and topped out at approximately 140,000 seamen in 1808. Even for a nation with a rich seafaring history, this was an incredible manpower level to sustain. The Royal Navy suffered an annual attrition rate of at least 10 percent, so each year it needed an average of 12,000 new recruits. One source of replacements to which the Royal Navy turned to meet its labor needs was American merchant vessels.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For more on British naval strategy, N.A.M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2004), 426-41, 454-72, 528-62; Michael Duffy, “The Establishment of the Western Squadron as the Linchpin of British Naval Strategy,” in *The Parameters of British Naval Power, 1650-1850*, ed. Michael Duffy (Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1992), 60-81.

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Lloyd, *The British Seaman, 1200-1860: A Social Survey* (London: Collins Press, 1968), 286-90; Denver Brunsmann, “The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World,” (PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, 2004), 381.

The United States became the largest neutral carrier during the protracted conflicts between Great Britain and France. American shipping in the foreign trade increased from 367,000 tons in 1793 to nearly triple that number (984,000 tons) by 1810. The drastic rise in foreign shipping stemmed primarily from the carrying trade. In addition, the coastal trade grew three times larger during this period.<sup>4</sup> Such drastic growth in the merchant fleet attracted tars from around the Atlantic world. A seaman serving aboard an American merchantman could make as much as \$23 per month, roughly three times the pay of an able seaman in the Royal Navy.<sup>5</sup> British merchant ships offered pay rates similar to their American counterparts, but also offered no protection against impressment. United States merchant vessels seemed a haven to both British seamen on avoiding naval service. Many British officials came to believe that a great number of British nationals served aboard American ships. Phineas Bond, British Consul in Philadelphia, claimed, “A vast proportion of the mariners employed in navigating American ships are foreigners – too many of whom I am sorry to say are his majesty’s natural born subjects.”<sup>6</sup> An anonymous editorialist for the *London Morning Chronicle* opined, “I take it for granted, that many of our seamen have, for better wages, and to avoid the impress in British ports . . . employed themselves in American navigation.”<sup>7</sup>

British officials not only worried about the loss of their merchant seamen, but also Royal

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<sup>4</sup> Timothy Pitkin, *A Statistical View of the Commerce of the United States* (Hartford, CT: Charles Hosmer, 1816), 389-91.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Lewis, *A Social History of the Navy, 1793-1815* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1960), 436-37; Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 104.

<sup>6</sup> Phineas Bond to Duke of Leeds, 18 September 1790, “The Letters of Phineas Bond,” *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the year 1897*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1898), 464.

<sup>7</sup> *The Six Letters of A.B. on the Differences Between Great Britain and the United States* (London: John Lambert, 1807), 7-8.

Navy deserters. Captain George Murray complained that, “boldfaced attempts are made in the American Ports to entice out Men to desert whenever they come within the means of doing so.”<sup>8</sup> Consul Bond concurred, “Our ships are often deserted by the whole crew, in the ports of the United States merely on the score of the superior rate of wages.”<sup>9</sup>

There was some legitimacy to British claims that their subjects crowded American decks. In 1807, Albert Gallatin, the Secretary of the Treasury during the Jefferson administration, estimated that a fifth of all seamen serving in the foreign trade were British subjects. He stated that significantly fewer Britons worked aboard American coasting and fishing vessels. Gallatin guessed a total of 9,000 British subjects plied their trade on American ships. That figure constituted less than one-seventh of all seamen in the US merchant fleet. Gallatin believed, however, nearly all of those Britons were able seamen, which represented nearly one half of all able seamen aboard American ships engaged in foreign trade.<sup>10</sup> Gallatin also admitted, however, that his data was incomplete and his count of 9,000 British seamen was only a guess. Additionally, Gallatin never clarified whose definition of British subject he was applying to the seamen.

Great Britain maintained the principle of indefeasible allegiance, which held that any person born a British subject remained so for life. An individual could not renounce one’s subjecthood, nor could a person evade the responsibilities owed to the crown,

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<sup>8</sup> George Murray to Phineas Bond, 21 December 1795, Phineas Bond Papers, Cadwalader Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.

<sup>9</sup> Phineas Bond to William Grenville, 1 February 1793, “Letters of Phineas Bond,” 525.

<sup>10</sup> Albert Gallatin to Thomas Jefferson, 13 April 1807, Thomas Jefferson Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, online, Washington, DC.

which for seamen meant an obligation to defend the realm.<sup>11</sup> Great Britain refused to recognize the naturalization process of foreign nations, including the United States. Any British subject residing in the United States in 1783, when the Treaty of Paris recognized American independence, was considered an American citizen. British subjects who immigrated to the United States after 1783 were still subjects.<sup>12</sup>

The United States government favored a much different interpretation of who constituted an American citizen. Simply immigrating to the United States comprised a major step in achieving American citizenship. After five years residence, an alien could obtain his naturalization by pledging an oath to support the Constitution and renouncing all other allegiances. For a brief period during the Adams administration, Federal authorities increased the residency requirement to fourteen years, but it returned to five at the beginning of the Jefferson presidency.<sup>13</sup> A naturalized citizen of the United States was entitled to all the rights and privileges of a native-born American. There were a considerable number of British nationals, particularly Scots and Irish, who had immigrated to the United States and become naturalized citizens. The population flow from Great Britain to the United States was substantial enough that Phineas Bond complained to the Foreign Secretary, “The passenger trade from Great Britain and Ireland is a constant source of population and advantage to this country [the United States]. . . we suffer a severe depopulation and America derives a vast benefit from it.”<sup>14</sup> As these

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<sup>11</sup> Scott Thomas Jackson, “Impressment and Anglo-American Discord, 1787-1818,” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1976), 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> This was finalized during the Jay Treaty negotiations in 1794, prior to that Great Britain only officially recognized those born in the thirteen colonies as citizens of the United States.

<sup>13</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1064-66; *Annals of Congress*, 5<sup>th</sup> Cong., 3<sup>rd</sup> sess., 1783; *Annals of Congress*, 7<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1183.

immigrants underwent the naturalization process, the United States' government considered them citizens. There were also many individuals who considered themselves *de jure* citizens of the United States and were considered such by the American government. Seaman Ned Myers serves as a perfect example.

Myers was born in Canada. He was orphaned at the age of six and at eleven he ran away to New York and began his new life as an American seaman. Myers worked for years aboard an American merchantman. During the War of 1812, he served on the Great Lakes in the US Navy. Myers was captured by the English in 1813, recognized as a native of Canada, and was nearly forced into British service. This seemed unjust to Myers. "America was, and ever has been, the country of my choice, and, while yet a child . . . I decided for myself to sail under the American flag." To Myers, the concept of infeasible allegiance was hypocritical, "if my father had a right to make an Englishman of me, by taking service under the English crown, I think I had a right make myself what I pleased."<sup>15</sup> Myers never underwent the formal naturalization process, but self-identified as an American after years of residence in the United States. There were many seamen who likewise viewed themselves as American citizens without ever legally pledging allegiance to the United States.

Great Britain's refusal to recognize the United States' naturalization process frustrated American political leaders. After all, American practices simply mirrored British policy. The British government considered foreign seamen *de jure* subjects if they served for two years in the Royal Navy, married an English subject, or took up

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<sup>14</sup> Bond to the Duke of Leeds, 10 September 1791, "Letters Phineas Bond," 488.

<sup>15</sup> James Fennimore Cooper, *Ned Myers; or A Life Before the Mast* (London: 1856), 72.

residence in Great Britain. American statesmen were quick to point out the inconsistencies. Rufus King, American Minister to Great Britain, argued to Lord Grenville, “If to the demand of a foreigner in her service by the nation to which he belongs, Great Britain answers that such a foreigner cannot be delivered, because he has voluntarily engaged to serve His Majesty, or is married or settled within His Majesty’s dominions, is she not bound by her own principles to admit the validity of the same answer from a foreign nation, when she requires the surrender of British subjects found in a similar predicament in the service or within the territory of such foreign nation?”<sup>16</sup> James Madison and James Monroe later made similar arguments to various British ministers. The hypocrisy in British policy was clear, so rather than try to justify the duplicity, Grenville and his successors ignored it. Great Britain continued to claim naturalized American citizens as British subjects. Under the doctrine of indefeasible allegiance, the Royal Navy felt entitled to the skill set of these tars.<sup>17</sup>

It was not only naturalized American citizens who were victimized by press gangs. Native born citizens of the United States often found themselves forced to serve aboard British men of war. Great Britain claimed no right to impress native born Americans and British officials routinely fell back on the excuse that “similarity of names, features, language and customs” created confusion. Foreign Secretary Richard Wellesley explained, “American citizens . . . have been mistaken for British subjects, and therefore forcibly compelled to serve in the English navy.”<sup>18</sup> Although the British used

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<sup>16</sup> Rufus King to William Grenville, 30 September 1796, *American State Papers, Series 1, Foreign Relations* 3:582.

<sup>17</sup> For example, James Madison to James Monroe, 5 January 1804, *Ibid.*, 85.

this argument repeatedly in explaining how native Americans ended up in the Royal Navy, it did not have much traction in the United States.

During the Adams administration, Secretary of State John Marshall scoffed at the pretext. “We know well that the difficulty of distinguishing between native Americans and British subjects, has been used . . . as an apology for the injuries complained of . . . we doubt the existence of the difficulty alleged,” Marshall wrote to Rufus King. “Among that class of people who are seamen, we can readily distinguish between a native American and a person raised to manhood in Great Britain or Ireland.”<sup>19</sup> Marshall refused to believe Royal Navy officers could not make the distinction as well. American merchant ship captains shared Marshall’s view. Captain William Hampton cited the distinct American look of his crewmen as he argued with Royal Navy officer Daniel Guerin over the nationality of three men pressed onto Guerin’s *Siren*. Meanwhile, many Royal Navy captain’s themselves admitted they knew the difference between American and British seamen.<sup>20</sup> Finally, the seizing of Americans was too frequent to have been accidental.

In 1796, the United States Congress passed a bill, an Act for the Relief and Protection of American Seamen. Among the provisions of the act, two agents were established to help alleviate the suffering of pressed Americans. They were located in

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Wellesley, *The Memoirs and Correspondence of Richard Wellesley*, vol. 3, ed. Robert R. Pierce (London: Richard Bentley, 1846), 103.

<sup>19</sup> Marshall to Rufus King, 20 September 1800, *ASP: FR*, 2:489.

<sup>20</sup> William Hampton to Mr. Ralston, 18 April 1796, Edward Clawson file, Entry 928 letters of impressed seamen, Records relating to impressed seamen, 1794-1815, Miscellaneous Records, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland. For examples of Royal Navy officers knowingly impressing American seamen see, S. Taylor to Robert Smith, 1 September 1796, Joseph Lowrey file, Entry 928, Misc. Records, RG 59, NACP; William Minaugh to the Mayor of New York, 30 April 1805, Entry 928, Misc. Records, RG 59, NACP.

London and the West Indies. The agents' main responsibility was to procure the release of as many impressed Americans as possible. Among their other tasks was the submission of an annual report on the number and status of seamen who had applied for release.<sup>21</sup> The record keeping of the West Indies agents was poor. They submitted few abstract returns, or at least few have survived. The London agents, however, were reliable. Although not all the returns from London can be account for, the majority have survived.

Between 1797 and September 1810, 10,501 impressed seamen applied to London agents for their release from the Royal Navy on the basis of their being American citizens. The Lords of the Admiralty never responded to the majority of the applications. Among those applicants who cases were reviewed, however, only 579 were detained because they were British subjects – slightly more than 5 percent. Another 606 claimants were acknowledged by the Royal Navy as Americans, but were denied discharge because they had accepted the King's Bounty. Once an impressed seaman accepted any payment from the Royal Navy, he was entered in the books as a volunteer and thus ineligible for release, regardless of his nationality. (Chapter Three examines the extreme lengths to which some British officers went in order to compel American seamen to take the bounty.) There were also another 121 sailors who the Admiralty refused to release based on a variety of reasons, such as mutinous behavior aboard a merchant vessel, smuggling, serving aboard a French privateer, and having been exchanged as a British prisoner-of-war. In total, the Royal Navy had a legitimate, or semi-legitimate, reason for retaining only 1305 of the seamen claiming American citizenship; a mere 12 percent of all who

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<sup>21</sup> "Act for the Relief and Protection of American Seamen," *Statutes at Large of the United States of America*, vol. 1 (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1846), 477-78.

applied for release through the London agent for American seamen. Comparatively, the Lords of the Admiralty ordered 2,553 seamen released as American citizens.<sup>22</sup>

Thousands of applications were simply ignored. Many more Americans remained in British for various other reasons, like the ship of which they served was on a foreign station, and a great many could not be discharged because the applicant was not aboard the ship named in his appeal. The latter was a favorite British retention method. The Admiralty could deny a seaman's release by claiming he could not be found. This was orchestrated either by incorrectly entering a man's name on the ship's books or by quickly transferring a sailor from one ship to another.<sup>23</sup> In the final calculation, there were too many Americans seized by the Royal Navy; misidentification was a pretext, nothing more.

The American government tried to rectify the situation by identifying American seamen. Part of the aforementioned Seamen's Act included a provision requiring sailors to carry protection certificates with them to sea. These protections included a brief physical description of the applicant and were meant to verify a sailor's status as an American citizen. In order to receive a protection, Jack Tar presented himself to a customs official, offered proof of his citizenship (which could be as simple as swearing to it and having a credible witness give confirmation), and paid the twenty-five-cent fee.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Entry 931, Quarterly Abstracts for the Release of Impressed Seamen, 1797-1801, Misc. Rec., RG 59, NACP; Entry 933, Abstracts of Quarterly Returns of Impressed Seamen, 1805-09, Misc. Rec., RG 59, NACP; Entry 935, Register of Applications for the Release of Impressed Seamen, 1794-1797, Misc. Rec., RG 59, NACP; Entry 936, Register of Application for the Release of Impressed Seamen, 1793-1802, 3 vol., Misc., Rec., RG 59, NACP; James Madison, *Message from the President of the United States Transmitting a Report From the Secretary of State on the Subject of Impressments, In Obedience to a Resolution From the House of Representatives* (Washington, DC: A & G Way, Printers, 1812), 16-58.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, James Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen* (1926; repr., Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1966), 108.

The protection's function was to keep seamen free from impressment by verifying their American citizenship. Problems arose with protections almost immediately. Although the Seamen's Act required the document to be obtained from customs collectors, all manner of officials issued the certificates, from justices of the peace to city mayors to foreign consuls. British policy made it clear that protections issued from any office other than customs collectors were deemed insufficient proof of American citizenship. The American government protested that protections issued by consuls should be recognized as well. A sailor might find himself in a foreign country sans protection: after all a piece of paper could be lost or damaged quite easily crisscrossing the world's oceans. Who could a seaman turn for a new protection but a consul? Thousands of sailors were at sea without protections when the Peace of Amiens ended abruptly in 1803. How were those men to obtain new certificates? Such arguments were made to no avail. The Admiralty continually denied release to any Jack Tar carrying a protection not issued by customs officials.<sup>25</sup>

Even a properly issued protection was no guarantee for an American seaman. The Lords of the Admiralty, British ministers, and Royal Navy officers all affirmed the existence of a robust black market trade in American protections. Charles Grey, Assistant Foreign Secretary in the Ministry of All Talents, harbored reservations about negotiating on impressment. Grey's principal concern was "that great abuses were

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<sup>24</sup> *Stats at Large of USA*, 1:477.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*; as an example of the debate on consul certificates, see Timothy Pickering to Rufus King, 26 October 1796, *ASP: FR* 2:146; William Grenville to King, 3 November 1796, *ibid.*, 146-47; King to Grenville, 28 January 1797, *ibid.*, 147-48; for an example of seamen denied their release because they had consul certificates instead of customs protections see, Entry 933, Misc. Rec., RG 59, NACP.

committed in granting protections.”<sup>26</sup> Seamen related countless instances of Royal Navy captains ignoring or destroying the documents based on claims of fraud. Thomas Story, master of the merchant brig *Happy Couple*, had three men pressed out of his vessel by HMS *Cambrian*. Story knew the men to be Americans and in possession of protections. He boarded the *Cambrian* and presented his evidence to Captain John Beresford in hopes of securing his crewmen’s release. Instead, Beresford told Story the three pressed men were English and their protections “amounted to nothing.” Beresford claimed to have been in the New York City customs house recently and witnessed “protections sold for two dollars each to a Ship’s entire company of Scotchmen, whom he knew had never before seen or been in any of the United States therefore he would pay no attention to those kinds of Certificates.”<sup>27</sup>

Many American officials did not believe counterfeit protections were as rampant as the British alleged. George Erving, London Agent and Consul, reported to James Madison that it was common practice among the British to bribe an American sailor into claiming he had either obtained his protection falsely or aided British seamen in fraudulently receiving one.<sup>28</sup> By such means, British officials could dismiss all American protections. John Hawker, London vice-consul, described to Madison even more straightforward deceit. John Harding was seized by a press gang in Liverpool in 1810. He sent his protection to Hawker, who in turn used Harding’s papers as proof of his

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<sup>26</sup> James Monroe to James Madison, 10 March 1806, letter, James Madison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Story, 5 April 1805, Affidavit, William Robinson file, Entry 928, Misc. Rec., RG 59, NACP.

<sup>28</sup> George Erving to James Madison, 10 April 1805, vol. 9 London, Consular Dispatches, Consular Correspondence, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD.

citizenship. The British denied Harding his release. The Admiralty stated it was a false protection and Harding's appearance did not match the description on the form. Harding swore to Hawking, "I was not overhauled by the Regulating Captain nor yet the Lieutenant they did not look to see if I had a scar about me."<sup>29</sup> The Admiralty claimed Harding's protection was a hoax without ever investigating. There were countless examples like Harding's. Once more, British policy created a situation that aggravated American officials and left American seamen exposed to further depredations. If Jack Tar was pressed and had no documents, the British claimed he was not American, but if he was taken up and possessed a protection, it was deemed a fraud.

The Royal Navy could not retain every man seized by its gangs, despite British intransigence. The protections never functioned as the American government envisioned, but being in possession of one could still prove useful. As noted earlier, between 1797 and 1810, more than 2,553 American seamen were freed from bondage. British refusal to accept protections at face value slowed the appeals process considerably, but it did not bring things to a halt. A pressed sailor wrote to either the London or West Indies relief agent and made his claim as an American citizen, which was stronger if accompanied by a protection. Occasionally an agent's forceful request on behalf of a pressed tar, aided by a protection, was enough to gain a man's liberty. More often than not, agents' petitions were denied for want of proof, even when accompanied by certificates. In such cases, agents sent the sailor a stock letter explaining further proof of his being a United States citizen was required.<sup>30</sup> The abducted seaman had to write to friends, family, or anybody

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<sup>29</sup> John Harding to John Hawker, 4 March 1810, Harding file, Entry 928, Misc. Rec., RG 59, NACP.

<sup>30</sup> The following is a copy of the agents' letter to appellants:

in America who could gather evidence on his behalf. The collected proof was sent to the State Department, copied, and forwarded to the relief agent, who appealed to the Admiralty once more. The entire process was drawn out and years could pass between petitions. During the nineteen years of Anglo-American discord over impressment, 25 percent of appellants were granted their release from the Royal Navy. Another 2 percent deserted when the opportunity presented itself, 10 percent became casualties of war, and the Royal Navy retained nearly two-thirds of all seamen taken off American vessels. As noted previously, the Admiralty found a myriad of excuses for keeping a tar in the service, and many times offered no reason at all other than the petitioner had failed to prove he was not a Briton.<sup>31</sup>

British officials often relied on shallow arguments during the impressment controversy. They branded impressed seamen British until proven otherwise. The British naturalized American citizens who married an English woman or who served two years in the Royal Navy, but refused to recognize the United States' similar naturalization processes. They refused to recognize even legitimate protection certificates. They were able to maintain such weak diplomatic positions, in part, because of the strength of the

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“London, [Insert date]

Mr. [blank/Lenox] Agent of the United States of America, informs [blank] that Application has been made for his Discharge, in consequence of his having represented himself to be an American citizen, and to which an Answer has been returned, stating that having no Document to prove his Citizenship, the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty cannot consent to this Discharge. Under these Circumstances, Mr. [blank] can only recommend to him (if he is an American) to write to his Friends for Proof of Citizenship, legally authenticated, which must be transmitted to the Secretary of State's Office, in the City of Washington; and [blank] will forward, free of Expence, any Letters which [blank] may enclose to his Friends on the Subject, but until such Proof is obtained nothing more can be done for him. If there are other Americans on Board the same Ship without Protection, and who have not entered nor taken the Bounty, they should also write to their Friends for Proof of Citizenship in the manner above directed, since if they have no Document, any Application for their Discharge will be fruitless.” In, Robert Curry file, Entry 928, Misc. Rec., RG 59, NACP.

<sup>31</sup> Entry 928, Entry 931, Entry 933, Entry 936, Misc. Rec., RG 59, NACP.

Royal Navy. Britannia ruled the waves. The Royal Navy had 516 warships deployed in 1812, including 101 ships of the line and 134 frigates. By comparison, the US Navy had fifteen vessels, none of them ships of the line.<sup>32</sup> James Madison recognized British maritime policy in regards to the United States was based on naval power. As he wrote:

As long as the British navy has so complete an ascendancy on the high seas, its commanders have not only an interest in violating the rights of neutrals within the limits of neutral patience, especially of those whose commerce and mariners are unguarded by fleets; they feel moreover the strongest temptation . . . to covet the full range of spoliation opened by a state of war. The rich harvest promised by the commerce of the United States gives to this cupidity all its force.<sup>33</sup>

Britons themselves often made the argument that the might of the Royal Navy gave the nation the right to do as it pleased. Two British pamphlets, Frederick Eden's *Address on the Maritime Rights of Great Britain* and Joseph Marryat's *Concessions to America the Bane of Britain*, advocated war with the United States on such premises.<sup>34</sup> Rufus King, James Monroe or Charles Pinkney could craft logical, eloquent, just rebuttals to each pretext offered by their British counterparts, but with American seamen defended by nothing more than a piece of paper, impressment continued.

Returning to the question of why American seamen were being impressed by the Royal Navy, the answer must be threefold. First, the wars with France were prosecuted on a strategy that relied on naval supremacy, which in turn required an excessive amount of able seamen, some of whom could be found serving aboard American merchant

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<sup>32</sup> Kevin D. McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry: The U.S. and Royal Navies at Sea in the War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 5-20.

<sup>33</sup> James Madison to James Monroe and Charles Pinkney, 3 February 1807, *ASP: FR*, 3:154.

<sup>34</sup> Frederick Morton Eden, *Address on the Maritime Rights of Great Britain* (London: 1807); Joseph Marryat, *Concessions to America the Bane of Britain; or the Cause of the Present Distressed Situation of the British Colonial and Shipping Interests Explained, and the Proper Remedy Suggested* (London: 1807).

vessels. Second, the policy of indefeasible allegiance provided the Royal Navy the pretext to seek out British subjects who had become naturalized United States citizens. Such individuals still owed service to the crown under English law. Third, the Royal Navy impressed American seamen because it could. Great Britain may have been fighting to keep Europe free from French tyranny, but as the unchallenged master of the seas, Britannia ruled the waves with absolute power and demonstrated that supremacy by seizing American sailors and forcing them into service by the thousands.

The number of seamen pressed into the Royal Navy has been debated for more than two centuries. Contemporaneous debates found Federalist and Republican politicians with differing ideas on the number of their countrymen aboard Royal Navy vessels. Most Federalists tended to downplay the number of impressments. An extreme example came from the Federalist dominated Massachusetts House of Representatives in 1813, which formed a committee on impressed seamen in order to undermine James Madison's argument that the practice justified war. The Massachusetts committee found only 145 cases of American sailors abducted by the Royal Navy.<sup>35</sup> Republicans pushed for a higher number, sometimes much greater than the ones presented by the Secretary of State. William Lyman was a loyal Republican and served as London Agent and Consul for six years, from 1805 until his death in 1811. He swore to Madison in 1807 that more than 15,000 Americans were serving in the Royal Navy.<sup>36</sup> One of the largest estimates of

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<sup>35</sup> *Report of the Committee of the House of Representatives of Massachusetts on the Subject of Impressed Seamen: with the Evidence and Documents Accompanying it* (Boston: 1813), 8-10.

<sup>36</sup> William Lyman to James Madison, 23 October 1807, vol. 9 London Dispatches, Consular Correspondence, RG 59, NACP.

American tars toiling aboard British ships came from John Adams, who placed the number at approximately 36,000.<sup>37</sup>

Historians have had as difficult a time reaching a reliable number. There are many scholars who concur with James Zimmerman's estimate.<sup>38</sup> Zimmerman figured that 9,991 seamen were impressed and applied for release as American citizens between 1797 and January 1, 1812. More seamen were seized between January and May 1812, but Zimmerman did not guess at a number. In all, he estimated 10,000 seamen should stand as the most acceptable conservative number. Zimmerman's research on impressed Americans stands as the most complete work nearly ninety years later, but he did not present the entire picture. Zimmerman's approximation was based solely on relief agents' abstract returns. These returns are extremely valuable, but they are not the only resource available. Additionally, there were inconsistencies in Zimmerman's work with the abstract reports and he made no attempt to account for seamen seized before 1797 or during 1812, thus 10,000 appears too low a figure.<sup>39</sup>

There are historians who disagree with Zimmerman's total and argue for a much lower number. Anthony Steel maintained impressment of American sailors was not widespread, as has been portrayed first by contemporaneous politicians, and subsequently by historians. In Steel's view, impressment acted more as a bargaining chip in Anglo-American negotiations and proved a useful issue for politicians, as well. Likewise, Jon Latimer, in his work *1812: War with America*, insisted the frequency and severity of

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<sup>37</sup> John Adams to James Monroe, 23 February 1813, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, vol. 10, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1854), 32-33.

<sup>38</sup> Among historians who have accepted Zimmerman's figure are Denver Brunsman, "Subjects vs. Citizens," 572; Alan Taylor, *Civil War of 1812*, 105; Donald Hickey, *Don't Give Up the Ship: Myths of the War of 1812* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 18-22.

<sup>39</sup> Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen*, 259-75.

impressment have been exaggerated in the historical record.<sup>40</sup> J. Mackay Hitsman argued that impressed American seamen numbered no more than “several thousand.” Kate Caffrey places the total “somewhere in the 4,000 range” and bases that number entirely from a list of names submitted to Congress that she found published in the *American State Papers*. Furthermore, Caffrey dismisses large parts of the list because of recurring names. Relief agents noted repeatedly when submitting their reports, however, that different seamen with the same name often applied for their freedom.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, John K. Mahon believes the total number of American victims of impressment was closer to 6,000.<sup>42</sup> For all the estimates offered by these scholars, none of them conducted the research necessary to make their arguments compelling.

James Monroe was likely correct when he asserted, “from the want of means to make their cases known, and other difficulties inseparable from their situation, there is reason to believe that no precise or accurate view, is now or ever can be exhibited of the names or number of our seamen who are impressed into and detained in the British service.”<sup>43</sup> Through combining all the available sources, perhaps a more accurate estimate can be offered. As previously stated, the available abstract reports from the American relief agents show that American seamen made 10,501 applications for their

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<sup>40</sup> Jon Latimer, *1812: War with America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1-7; Anthony Steel, “Anthony Merry and the Anglo-American Dispute about Impressment, 1803-1806,” *Cambridge Historical Journal* IX, no. 3 (1949), 331-351; Anthony Steel, “Impressment in the Monroe-Pinkney Negotiation, 1806-1807,” *American Historical Review* 57, no. 2 (Jan. 1952), 352-369

<sup>41</sup> For example, William Lyman lists ten separate George Johnsons during his time as agent, sixteen different John Davises, and six individual John Clarks; Entry 933, Misc. Rec., RG 59, NACP.

<sup>42</sup> J. Mackay Hitsman, *The Incredible War of 1812* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 15; Kate Caffrey, *The Twilights Last Gleaming: Britain vs. America, 1812 – 1815* (New York: Stein and Day, 1977), 23; John K. Mahon, *The War of 1812* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1972), 7.

<sup>43</sup> *Message from the President of the United States transmitting a report of the Secretary of State on the subject of Impressments, January 15, 1812*, (Washington, DC: 1812), 5.

release between 1797 and September 1810. The final word from an American official was sent by the London consul, Reuben G. Beasley, who reported 802 new cases of impressment in 1811.<sup>44</sup> In sum, 11,303 cases of impressment were reported by the London agents. This number is much higher than Zimmerman's total for the same period. According to his research, "If one should take the more conservative figure for the years 1803 to 1812; namely 5,897, and add to it the figure for the period previous to 1803; namely, 2,410, a grand total of 8,397 would be reached."<sup>45</sup> A key reason for the discrepancy is Zimmerman's inconsistency. He offers 2,410 as the total number of seamen impressed prior to 1803, but earlier in his research Zimmerman presented the same figure for the period covering only 1799 to 1802.<sup>46</sup> While Zimmerman claimed his statistics covered the decade and a half between 1797 and 1812, his figure only accounted for the years 1799 to 1811. Zimmerman excluded six years of impressment from his calculations. Even the new figure of 11,303, however, is based solely on the London abstract returns. It does not include occurrences of impressment between 1793 and 1797, in 1812 before the outbreak of war, nor does it include reports from the West Indies agents.

Silas Talbot, the original American representative in the West Indies, submitted the names of 217 seamen he was able to release during his term of service, which lasted less than two years. Talbot never stated how many applications he received during his time, but he did make it clear that he was overwhelmed by the number. Talbot also

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<sup>44</sup> The reports of William Lyman are found in, *ibid.*, 29-58; Reuben G. Beasley's report can be found in, vol. 9 London Dispatches, Consular Correspondence, RG 59, NACP.

<sup>45</sup> Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen*, 267.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

indicated he was disappointed more often than not in his efforts to release captive seamen. “I have been in this Island along while, and have not neglected to use all the means and exertions in my power to accomplish the object of my mission and I am sorry to say that the effects have not been equal to my Zeal.” Talbot wrote after being relieved, “Without descanting on particulars I can say with truth and sincerity, that my situation from my arrival in the West Indies to the present day has been attended with almost constant perplexity, vexation, and Pain.”<sup>47</sup>

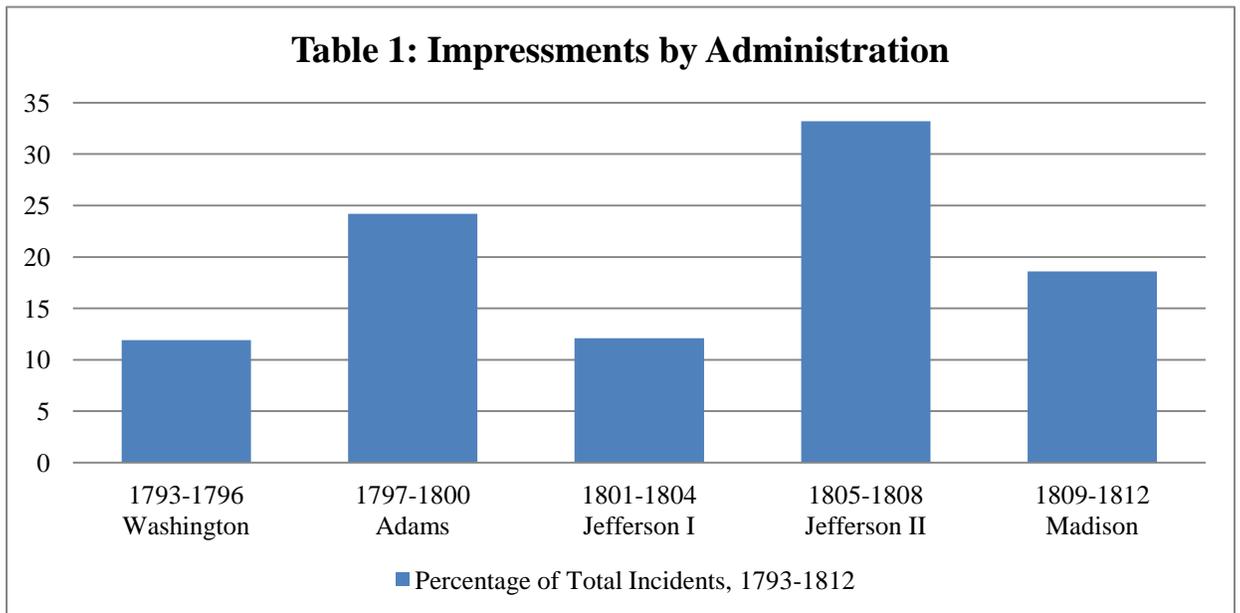
Talbot’s successor, William Savage, accomplished little, as well. Savage managed to secure the release of 351 seamen during his three years of service. Like Talbot, Savage did not state how many seamen applied for release. Talbot and Savage were nearly identical in the number of seamen they were able to release on a yearly basis, however. Talbot had a release rate of 113 seamen per year; Savage freed an average of 117 Americans. There is no numerical record from West Indies agents after William Savage in 1801, but if subsequent West Indies agents matched the yearly release rate of their predecessors, another 1,150 impressed American seamen can be accounted for. In all, 1,718 seems an acceptable number of tars abducted and released in the West Indies. When this number is combined with the 11,303 seamen reported from London, the total number of impressed American seamen increases to 13,021.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Silas Talbot to Timothy Pickering, 4 June 1798, Silas Talbot Papers, G.W. Blunt-White Library, Mystic Seaport, Mystic, CT.

<sup>48</sup> The information is a compilation of many records, including; Entry 928 letters of impressed seamen, Entry 929 Collector of Customs General Circular Instructions, Entry 930 Miscellaneous Lists and Papers Regarding Impressed Seamen, 1796-1818, Entry 931 Quarterly Abstracts of Application for the Release of Impressed Seamen, 1797 – 1801, Entry 932 Quarterly Returns of Impressed Seamen, 1805-1809, Entry 934 Letters from the Admiralty Office to Joshua Johnson, 1794-96, Entry 935 Index to Register of Applications for the Release of Impressed Seamen, 1797, Entry 936 Register of Applications for the Release of Impressed Seamen, 1792-1802, Misc., Rec., RG 59, NACP; Talbot Papers, G.W. Blunt-

The information is scarce regarding the number of seamen pressed in the years prior to and following the submission of abstracts. Some information is available, however, that can be used to arrive upon a reasonable approximation. There were 5,966 seamen who left behind some record of the year they were pressed. The table below represents the compilation of that information, grouped together by years to coincide with presidential administrations.<sup>49</sup>



Slightly less than 12 percent of all impressments took place before relief agents began maintaining consistent records. Knowing of 694 prior incidents and using 12,327<sup>50</sup> as the number of applicants seized between 1797 and 1811, another 6 percent must be accounted for. Speaking conservatively, 740 more seamen were coerced into the Royal

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White Library; Message to Congress on Impressed Seamen, January 15, 1812. Hereafter these will be cited as Collected Records of Impressed Seamen when referenced together.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> This number is reached by subtracting the 694 seamen known to have been impressed prior to 1797 from the 13,021 who applied for relief beginning in 1797. Clearly some of those applying for release were impressed before the Act for American Seamen established a concrete method of appeal. Deducting those applicants helps to ensure that there will be no inflation of numbers and minimize the chances of double counting.

Navy before passage of the Act for American Seamen. Similar methods can be employed to account for those impressed in 1812 before the declaration of war. With 1.1 percent of impressments occurring between January and May of that year, 140 seems a conservative number for sailors who fell into British hands. By totaling all these figures, the number of seamen impressed between 1793 and May 1812 increases to 13,901.

Another group of seamen remains to be taken into consideration – illiterates. Ira Dye’s research into early American seafarers revealed that 37 percent could not read or write.<sup>51</sup> There is no reason to believe illiterate seamen were less likely to find themselves in the press gang’s clutches. It is fair to assume the same ratio was abducted as existed among the general body of merchant seafarers. A tar who did not possess the education necessary to pen an appeal was obviously in a more difficult situation. Certainly, this was the group of people Monroe referenced when he described those who lacked “the means to make their cases known.” Yet even illiterate seamen found ways to apply for their liberation. Illiterate men’s most common relief application methods were making their mark on a group appeal or petition, appearing in person at the relief agents’ office, or finding a fellow salt willing to write letters or swear a deposition on their behalf. In a more limited sampling of one thousand applicants whose paperwork remained largely intact, 12 percent were illiterates who had others plead their case.<sup>52</sup> Applying that 12 percent across the entire database would mean that a full quarter of impressed seamen have been completely unaccounted for. An additional 25 percent must be added to the

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<sup>51</sup> Ira Dye, “Early American Merchant Seafarers,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 120, No. 5 (Oct. 1976), 340-348.

<sup>52</sup> This information is derived from Entry 928, Misc. Rec., RG 59, NACP.

known quantity of 13,901 impressed American seamen, which equals another 3,255 victimized sailors.

Finally, there is some subtraction that needs to take place, as well. Three log books from the London relief agents have survived completely intact. They cover various periods during the impressment controversy; the first book covers the last six months of 1797, the second begins in October 1801 and ends in May of 1802, and the thirds spans from October 1805 to the end of December 1809. The combined entries of the log books reveal a duplication rate of 7.7 percent. Although some relief agents did account for repeat applicants, it was inconsistent and sporadic. For the sake of uniformity, 7.7 percent of the total number, or 1,321, should be deducted as renewed or recurrent applications.<sup>53</sup>

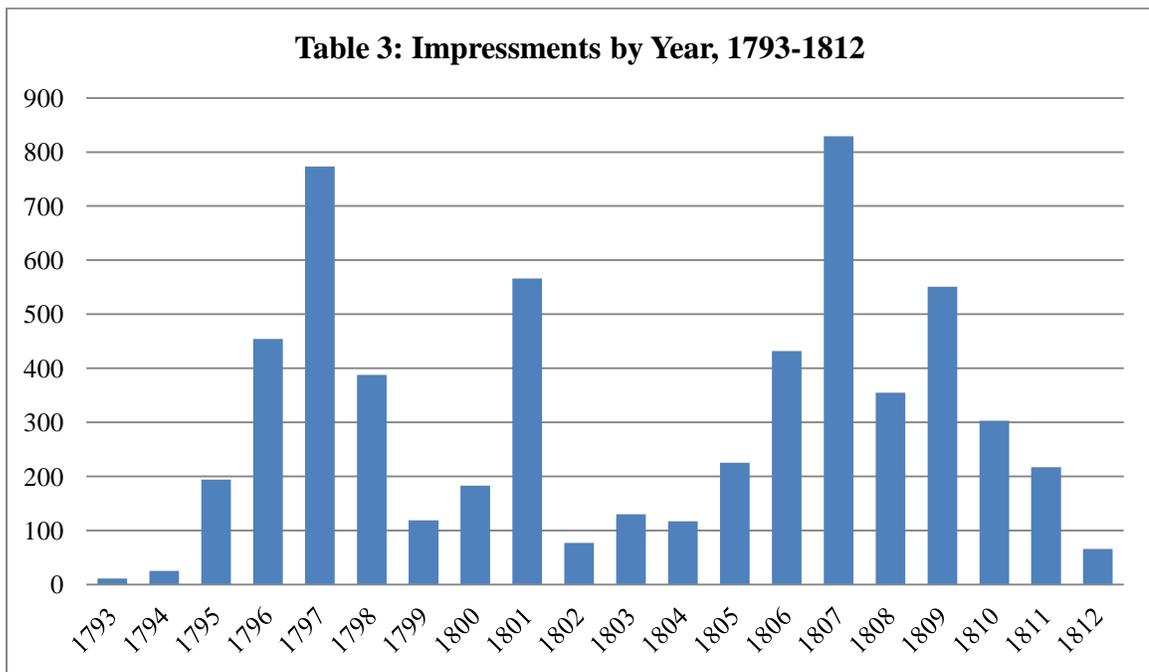
Once all the numbers are taken into consideration, the total estimate of Americans pressed into the Royal Navy is 15,835. (Table 2) Obviously this is a significant increase over the widely accepted mark of 10,000, but the larger number is firmly rooted in all the State Department records and accounts for significant groups of seamen previously ignored.

**Table 2: Total Number of Impressed Americans**

Source	Number
London Returns, 1797-1811	10,609
West Indies Releases, 1797-1811	1,718
Impressed 1793-96	1,434
Impressed January-June 1812	140
Unrecorded Illiterate Seamen	3,255
Duplicate Applications	-1,321
<b>Total</b>	<b>15,835</b>

<sup>53</sup> Entry 932. Misc. Rec., RG 59; Entry 936, Misc. Rec. RG 59, NACP.

The compilation of the collected records of impressed seamen into one data base has provided more information than the number of impressed Americans. It has also revealed when impressment was most common, where a sailor was most likely to be taken up, and where these tars came from – where they called home. A broad view of when impressment was most common was presented in Table 1. As Jefferson’s administration was the only two term presidency during the impressment controversy, it is not surprising that most cases occurred during his eight years. What does impressment look like when taken year by year?



The Royal Navy started slowly. Perhaps in 1793 and 1794, there was an effort to discern an American from a Brit. There was also less demand for seamen as the Royal Navy had not reached the behemoth proportions it would in the coming years. Impressment increases significantly in the next two years, which helps to explain the Seaman’s Act of 1796. The number of cases remained high in 1797, but began dropping drastically in 1798 and stayed low through 1800. The Quasi-War is a probable

explanation. The United States was aiding the British cause by fighting a naval war with France. Even if there was no direct Anglo-American alliance, the Royal Navy had nothing to gain by alienating the enemy's enemy. Once the Quasi-War was resolved, however, impressment spiked once more. The Treaty of Amiens in 1802 explains the plunge in incidents, just as the ending of the peace accounts for the steady increase after 1802.

Impressment reached its nadir in 1807. British aggression that year culminated in the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair, which will be discussed at length in Chapter Six. The United States responded to the Royal Navy's attack on one of its frigates with a full embargo. Although there was a decrease in impressment during the embargo, it was not as drastic as might be expected. This speaks volumes about the amount of smuggling that occurred during Jefferson's trade shutdown. The lifting of the embargo coincided with a leap in abductions by the Royal Navy, but after 1809, there was a consistent decline until the war. The American government had imposed a series of trade restrictions, which might explain the steady drop in impressment. Perhaps the Royal Navy had grown discerning about the men it took off American merchant ships. Or maybe by 1810 American seamen had developed a certain amount of savvy in avoiding the press and learned in which ports of call to maintain a low profile. Either way, the idea that impressment ceased to be an issue after 1807 is clearly misguided. Although impressment slowed, it did not stop and more than 20 percent of all known incidents occurred after the *Chesapeake-Leopard*.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Historians from James Zimmerman to Scott Thomas Jackson to Claire Phelan have deemphasized the importance of impressment during the Madison administration.

Americans were liable to be pressed anywhere. The United States merchant fleet serviced ports around the world. Men reported abduction in Calcutta, Malta, Argentina, the Cape of Good Hope, and many more diverse locations. There were certain places where a press gang was more likely to grab a seaman. More than a third of all impressments took place in the West Indies.<sup>55</sup> As mentioned earlier, Silas Talbot found it impossible to keep pace with the number of incidents occurring in the Caribbean. The reason impressment thrived in the West Indies was because the Royal Navy experienced a higher attrition rate there due primarily to tropical diseases like yellow fever. Seamen had to be found to fill out the shrinking complements of ships on the West Indian station. British captains found those waters teeming with American sailors ripe for the picking. American ships accounted for an incredible amount of the West Indies carrying trade. American vessels carried nearly 40 percent of the exports produced by the British West Indies, and the French West Indies relied even more heavily on US merchantmen.<sup>56</sup>

Antigua and Jamaica were the most dangerous places for Americans; half of all impressments took place on the two islands. Both islands were important to Royal Navy operations in the West Indies – Antigua was the seat of the Leeward Island Station and Kingston, Jamaica, was the largest British port in the Caribbean. The islands were also major sugar producers, which brought American vessels there in the first place. Thousands of sailors came to Jamaica and Antigua to load their ships with tens of thousands of hogsheads of sugar. It was not uncommon for press gangs to sweep the

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<sup>55</sup> Collected Records of Impressed Seamen.

<sup>56</sup> Troy Bickham, *The Weight of Vengeance: The United States, the British Empire, and the War of 1812* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 96-8.

docks once the loading was finished and seize dozens of seamen at a time.<sup>57</sup> Ships' masters often complained they were stuck in the West Indies with their cargoes and vessels. The British had abducted so many tars the merchantmen could not leave port for a want of able hands.<sup>58</sup> Impressment in the West Indies operated out of a perfect combination of dire need and opportunity.

Ironically, American seamen ran less of a risk on voyages to Great Britain. One in four impressed Americans were taken up in the British Isles. Although more American sailors traveled to Great Britain than the West Indies, the presence of actual British seamen in British ports helps explain the decreased number of impressments. Even so, Liverpool and London could be dangerous places for an American, Liverpool especially.<sup>59</sup> The regulating captain there seemed bent on pressing as many Americans as he could. David Smith and John Allen complained of the regulating captain destroying their protections. Thomas William accused the officer of lying about William having taken the bounty. John Harding likewise accused the captain of dealing in untruths, as related earlier. A third of all Americans seized by press gangs in Britain were taken up in Liverpool, two times as many as were grabbed in London, the next most common location.<sup>60</sup> There may have been close commercial ties between the United States and Liverpool, but American seamen could expect no sympathy on the Mersey.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Cyprian Cook and Elijah Clarke, deposition, David Parker file, Entry 928, Misc. Rec., RG 59, NACP.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Stubbs to Jonathan Drayton, Speaker of the House of Representatives, 3 May 1796, Edward Clawson file, Entry 928, Misc. Rec., RG 59, NACP.

<sup>59</sup> Collected Records on Impressed Seamen.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

A significant number of sailors were pressed at sea. American merchant vessels were signaled to haul-to by British men-of-war on the open ocean. A ship's captain could attempt to outrun the warship or he could obey. Generally, the strength of a man-of-war compelled the captain to haul-to. Press crews boarded the quarry, the ship's company was mustered on deck, and a Royal Navy officer took whomever he pleased. One in three impressed Americans was carried off in this manner. The majority of impressments at sea occurred on the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea.<sup>62</sup> Americans found impressment on the high seas particularly egregious. United States officials argued repeatedly that no nation had sovereignty over the high seas. Every ship that flew a national flag was an extension of that country's sovereignty. Therefore, United States territorial rights were being violated whenever British officers pressed a man aboard an American vessel.<sup>63</sup> The argument never gained purchase, however, and impressment on the high seas continued until the declaration of war.

Tars were often depicted as transients; vagabonds who moved from port to port without ever putting down roots, and the stereotype has persisted. While that impression is not entirely wrong – seamen did routinely crisscross the Atlantic and were often at sea for extended periods of time – that did not exclude them from having families and considering a specific place home. A total of 3,520 impressed seamen left behind some indication of which state they were from [Table 4] with 2,208 stating specifically what

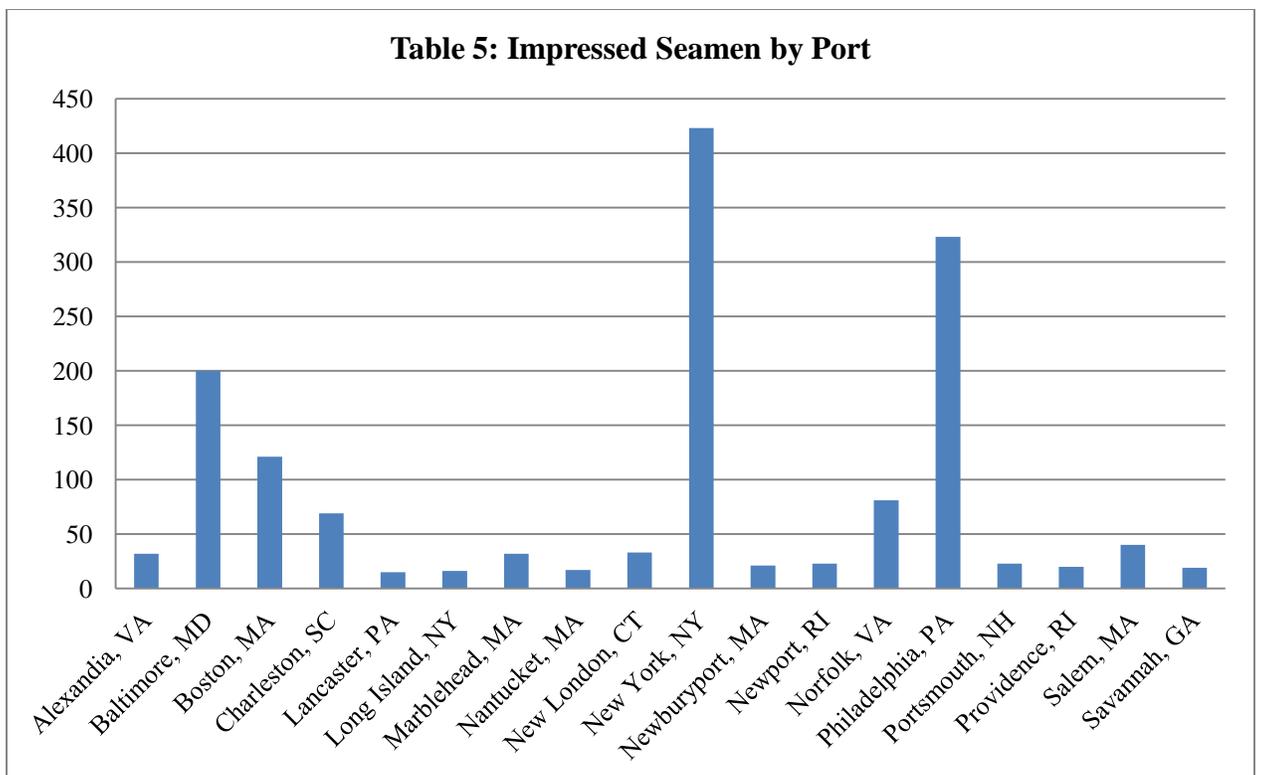
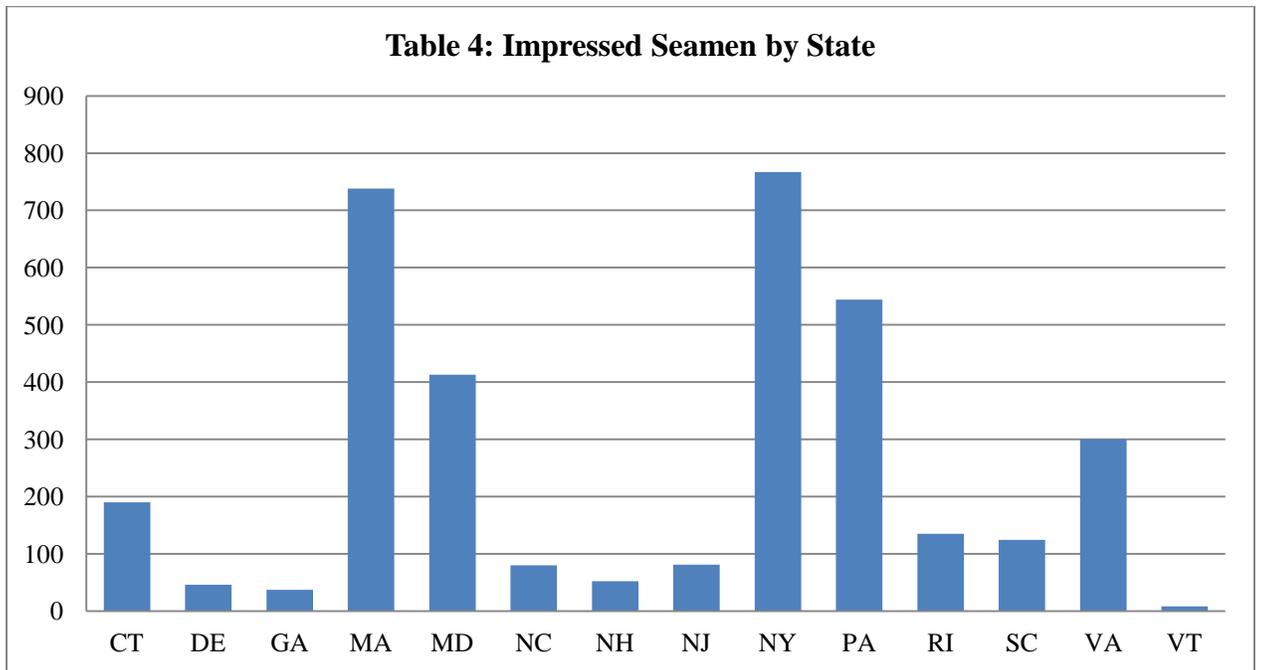
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<sup>61</sup> For more on the commercial ties between the US and Liverpool see, B.H. Tolley, "The Liverpool Campaign Against the Order in Council and the War of 1812," in *Liverpool and Merseyside: Essays in the Economic and Social History of the Port and its Hinterland*, ed. J.R. Harris (New York: A.M. Kelley, 1969), 98-145.

<sup>62</sup> Collected Records of Impressed Seamen.

<sup>63</sup> For examples of this argument, see James Monroe to Secretary of Foreign Affairs of Great Britain, 23 September 1805, *ASP: FR* 2:734-37; John Marshall to Rufus King, 20 September 1800, *ASP: FR*, 2:489; James Madison to James Monroe and Charles Pinkney, 3 February 1807, *ASP: FR*, 3:154.

port they called home [Table 5]. Examining these numbers reveals that certain accepted truths of impressment must be reconsidered.<sup>64</sup>



<sup>64</sup> Collected Records of Impressed Seamen.

One of the greatest misconceptions is that New England seamen shouldered the burden of impressment. In 1804, Monroe described New England as “the quarter of the Union most injured by these acts” of impressment.<sup>65</sup> That has been accepted as fact ever since. While it is true Massachusetts saw the second highest number of impressments, the rest of New England suffered only mildly. Virginia had more sailors abducted than Connecticut, and New Jersey lost more native sons to the Royal Navy than New Hampshire. In actuality, the mid-Atlantic states bore the brunt of American losses to British press gangs. Combined New York and Pennsylvania tars alone accounted for more than a third of all impressments. Maryland was the state with the fourth most losses and Virginia with the fifth most.<sup>66</sup> Many historians have long accepted the South had no stake in the issue of impressment, but the distribution of pressed seamen was more even than has been previously assumed. New England was home to 32 percent of pressed seamen; the mid-Atlantic states, 41 percent; and Southern tars equaled 27 percent of those coerced into British service.<sup>67</sup>

The above figures are less surprising when the information in Table 5 is taken into consideration. New York and Philadelphia were home to the majority of impressed seamen by a wide margin, followed by Baltimore, Boston, Norfolk, and Charleston, South Carolina, respectively. It is no coincidence that, with the exception of Norfolk, these were the most important American ports. These five cities (Norfolk excluded) dominated every major trade category. New York accounted for twice as much shipping

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<sup>65</sup> James Monroe to Thomas Jefferson, 25 September 1804, Thomas Jefferson Papers, Series 1, General Correspondance; Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

<sup>66</sup> Maryland is a difficult state to categorize. Technically, because Maryland lies south of the Mason-Dixon line it is a southern state. In many ways, including culturally and politically, Maryland has more in common with the mid-Atlantic region. This was as true in the 1800’s as it is today.

<sup>67</sup> Collective Records of Impressed Seamen.

tonnage as the next closest city, which was Boston. Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Charleston followed in gross tonnage. Respectively, New York City, Philadelphia, and Boston were responsible for the majority of the foreign trade. In the coastal trade, Baltimore replaced Philadelphia, but the other two cities maintained their places. The trade completely dominated by the New England states was the fishing and whaling industries.<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, though, there were few recorded examples of seamen being pressed out of fishing vessels or whalers.

New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore were also the nation's largest and fastest growing cities, each nearly doubling in size between 1800 and 1810. Boston and Charleston did not experience the same rapid growth, but were still the fourth and fifth largest cities. Norfolk, while not nearly as populous, was increasingly important, particularly since the US Navy established a ship yard there.<sup>69</sup> It is logical the cities with the largest populations and highest shipping tonnage were also the places most impacted by impressment. Yet the myth of New England dominance in both foreign trade and impressment has persisted.<sup>70</sup>

When the next five most affected ports are examined – Salem, New London, Alexandria, Marblehead, and Portsmouth – the presence of New England cities increases considerably, but the number of impressed seamen who hailed from these locales was significantly smaller. If the number of impressed seamen is considered as a percentage of

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<sup>68</sup> Pitkin, *Statistical View of the Commerce*, 74-81, 391-93, 397-402.

<sup>69</sup> Campbell Gibson, "Population Division Working Paper No. 27: Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States:1790 to 1990," (Washington, DC: US Census Bureau, 1998), 3-4.

<sup>70</sup> For a recent example, see Bickham, *Weight of Vengeance*, 162-63.

each town or city's male population, New England locales do not stand out, with the exception of New London, Connecticut. [Table 6]

**Table 6: Impressed Seamen as Percentage of Male Population**

City or Town	Projected Impressed Seamen <sup>71</sup>	Total Male Population circa 1810	Total Percentage
New London, CT	237	1,619	15.3
Norfolk, VA	570	4,596	12.9
Marblehead, MA	221	2,950	7.6
New York, NY	3008	48,186	6.2
Baltimore, MD	1425	23,277	6.1
Alexandria, VA	221	3,613	6.1
Philadelphia, PA	2311	43,651	5.2
Boston, MA	855	16,893	4.9
Salem, MA	285	6,306	4.4
Portsmouth, NH	158	3,467	4.4
Charleston, SC	491	12,355	3.8

The truth is all cities and towns along the Atlantic coast had seamen taken up by the Royal Navy, from Wiscasset in Maine territory to Perth Amboy, New Jersey to St. Mary's, Georgia. Every port suffered from impressment. Impressment was a shared burden. Nor were coastal towns the only ones impacted. Lancaster, Pennsylvania,

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<sup>71</sup> I reached these projections by taking the number of impressed seamen from each city as a percentage of the total number who reported their home port to the relief agents. I then applied that percentage to the total number of impressments. For example, 423 seamen stated they were from New York, which is 19 percent of 2,208 – the total number of recorded home ports. 15,835 is the total number of impressed Americans, 19 percent of whom were from New York, equaling 3,008. As an equation it looks like this:  $423 \div 2,208 = .19 \times 15,835 = 3,008$

Durham, North Carolina, Burlington, Vermont, even Lexington, Kentucky had native sons fall into British hands. Impressment was an issue that affected the entire country.<sup>72</sup>

The impressment controversy grew out of conflicting ideas about British subjecthood and American citizenship. It was compounded by the Royal Navy's need for able seamen and its ability to take American jack tars without facing any serious repercussions. The demographics in this chapter have dispelled many misconceptions about impressment, beginning with the number of American seamen who found themselves coerced into the Royal Navy. Over 15,000 men were impressed over the course of nineteen years, which is a significant increase over the generally accepted figure of 10,000. Additionally, the compiled data base erased any idea that the Royal Navy curtailed its aggression after the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair. Twenty percent of all impressments occurred between 1808 and 1812 – hardly indicative of British conciliation. Furthermore, the information provided an idea of where American seamen were most likely to be impressed, with one third abducted in the West Indies, another third on the high seas, and a quarter in the British Isles. Perhaps most interesting was the data on the regional origin of impressed Americans. Common wisdom long held that New Englanders shouldered the burden of impressment and the South was generally unaffected by the practice. Both ideas are false. The mid-Atlantic states suffered the greatest losses from impressment, but the distribution was more equal than previously thought. Forty-one percent of all impressed seamen were from the mid-Atlantic, 32 percent from New England, and 27 percent from the South. Clearly, southerners had a stake in the impressment controversy. The geographic breakdown also demonstrates that impressment was more than a regional issue – it was a national concern. In the next

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<sup>72</sup> Collective Records of Impressed Seamen.

chapter, seamen will become more than numbers and statistics, however, as the focus shifts to the lived experience of an impressed American tar.

CHAPTER THREE:  
“HELL ON EARTH:”  
IMPRESSMENT AS A LIVED EXPERIENCE

Daniel Baker was a broken man. A press crew from HMS *Princess* seized him in March 1812. Baker tried desperately to shield himself with his protection and his American citizenship, but it was all for naught. Baker had written to R.G. Beasley, the London Agent for American Seamen, who had promised to do his utmost to secure Baker’s freedom. James Monroe, as Secretary of State, had reviewed Baker’s case and agreed that the State Department should pursue his release. Unfortunately, Baker was transferred to HMS *Union* and had already put to sea. Baker knew that, off the *Princess* and out of London, years could pass before word reached the *Union* that he had been wrongfully impressed and should be freed. Baker penned a letter to his family before leaving Cadiz. “I have no hope of getting clear, he wrote, “If I do not gain my discharge soon I shall try to make my escape.” Desertion from the Royal Navy carried with it the prospect of being hanged if caught. Baker warned his parents, “if you do not hear from me again soon, you expect that I am no more for there is nothing but cruelty before me every day.” Baker’s despair was complete and he wished his mother and father to relay to the rest of his family “that I live in hopes to see them once more but I have seen a great deal of trouble since I left them and I thought last fall that my luck had turned but now my hopes are gone.”<sup>1</sup> Baker and thousands of his countrymen fell victim to the Royal Navy’s insatiable need for manpower. This chapter moves beyond the demographics of impressment and explores what it was like for seamen who suddenly found themselves forced into the service of Great Britain. How did American tars experience incarceration

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Baker to Paul Baker, letter, 12 June 1812; Daniel Baker file; Records of Impressed Seamen, 1793 – 1815; Records of the Department of State, Record Grouping 59, Entry 928; National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, Maryland.

in the Royal Navy? What were the “cruelties” that men such as Daniel Baker faced each day? In what ways, if any, did impressment affect American seamen’s self-perception and their view of the United States? These are the key questions that this chapter aims to answer through an examination of impressment as a lived experience.

Historical approaches to the character of impressment run the gamut. N.A.M. Rodger established himself as the most rigorous defender of the practice. He argued that the inhumane aspects of impressment were often exaggerated by both its contemporaneous opponents and subsequent historians. Although physical confrontations between press gangs and seamen were a regular occurrence, Rodger called impressment “a humdrum affair calling for little if any violence.” He took the argument further by placing volunteerism and impressment on equal footing. Rodger’s argument was based primarily on the fact that a pressed man was not inhibited from advancing in the Royal Navy and often seamen, once in the clutches of the press gang, accepted their fate and took the King’s shilling. As a result, Rodger urged “the historian to consider the recruiting service ashore and afloat as one unified system.”<sup>2</sup>

Peter Kemp, likewise, seems to view impressment as a rather mundane affair. He implies that seamen did not mind the press so long as there was still access to loose women while their vessel was in port. Kemp states that “no valid argument existed against it [the press]” and that an impressed tar was “tolerably well treated.” Kemp acknowledges that life aboard a tender was often miserable for a tar, he points out that, generally, seamen were not aboard a tender for longer than forty-eight hours. Kemp argues without any supporting evidence that while life in the Royal Navy may not have

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<sup>2</sup> N.A.M. Rodger, *Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London: William Collins Sons & Co., 1986), 164 – 182.

been ideal many sailors preferred naval service over signing on to a merchant ship. “The discipline might be less rigorous,” Kemp states, “but the living conditions were infinitely worse. The work on board, too, was very much harder . . . compared with a ship of war.”<sup>3</sup> Rodger and Kemp’s views on impressment are extreme in their unwillingness to confront the more dismal aspects of forced enlistment in the Royal Navy.

There are numerous historians that take an opposite view of the press gang. J.R. Hutchinson produced one of the earliest histories of impressment and was highly critical of the practice. He viewed the impress service as “oppressive and unjust in that it yearly enslaved, under the most noxious conditions, thousands against their will.” Hutchinson did not admire the treatment of sailors in the Royal Navy, volunteers or pressed. He criticized the pay, provisions, and living conditions in His Majesty’s service, but his harshest critique was of the naval press itself; the Royal Navy, “Standing as a bulwark against aggression and conquest . . . [it] ground under its heel the very people it protected, and made them slaves in order to keep them free.”<sup>4</sup>

Marcus Rediker and Nicholas Rogers are equally critical of the press. Being seized by a press gang was tantamount to a death sentence, “that is what naval service amount to for untold thousands, since almost half of all of those pressed . . . died at sea.” Even before the men were put aboard men-of-war, they had to survive the misery of being in a press tender, where “Pressed men were treated as criminals, locked up in fetid holds . . . until they were crawling with vermin and virtually suffocating.” Rediker eschews the power structure and labor relations on naval vessels which “invested the

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<sup>3</sup> Peter Kemp, *The British Sailor: A Social History of the Lower Deck* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1970), 38, 100 – 105.

<sup>4</sup> J.R. Hutchinson, *The Press Gang, Afloat and Ashore* (New York: Dodo Press, reprint 2004), 7-9.

captain with near-dictatorial powers and made the ship one of the earliest totalitarian work environments.” Meanwhile, Rogers condemns the repercussions of the practice for those left behind; “families whose men were impressed had no advances or bounties to rely on and were therefore more likely to find themselves applying for poor relief.” In short, a sailor had nothing to gain by service in the Royal Navy and the press was a curse to be avoided.<sup>5</sup>

More recently, Denver Brunzman has attempted to negotiate an understanding between the extreme views of Rodger and Rediker. Brunzman argues that “Rodger exaggerates the contentment of navy seamen while Rediker underestimates the opportunities of sailing in both navy and merchant vessels.” Yet while acknowledging that impressment “violated seamen’s liberties by taking away one of their most valuable assets in the Atlantic world, the ability to move freely,” he also argues that “life at sea for most impressed seamen was not any worse than for other sailors, and in some cases it was much better.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, impressment was unpopular because sailors were offered no choice, but in the end, a pressed man’s time in the fleet was on par with voluntary service in the merchant marine or navy.

There are two problems with the arguments offered above. First, there is the issue of sources. Literary scholar Daniel Ennis posits, “Aside from the inconsistent Admiralty records of the period . . . historians at the poles of the debate are often dependent on literary and artistic . . . sources in order to reach their conclusions.” His critique is

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<sup>5</sup> Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 33, 212; Nichols Rogers, *The Press Gang: Impressment and its Opponents in Georgian Britain* (New York: Continuum Press, 2007), 118.

<sup>6</sup> Denver Brunzman “The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 2004), 7-8.

particularly relevant in the work of Rodger, Kemp, and Hutchinson, although Rediker also relies heavily on Admiralty records and literary representations of impressment. Little of the scholarship on impressment attempts to incorporate the views of seamen. Material of this type is available through the Admiralty records, but in limited quantity and hardly enough to gain an understanding of how sailors viewed impressment. Ennis is also correct that interpretations of impressment often lean on cultural constructs of the practice, works like Tobias Smollet's *Roderick Random* or Richard Cumberland's *The Sailor's Daughter*. Cultural representations of impressment are of the utmost importance when studying public perception of the impress service, but they are not accurate depictions of the hardships a man endured once grabbed by a gang. There are some practical reasons for the silencing of seamen, particularly illiteracy, but there is an element missing when arguments regarding the relative benignity or inherent violence in impressment fail to incorporate the views of men who experience the press.<sup>7</sup>

The second problem, especially as it relates to this dissertation, is that the great majority of the research on impressment is concerned with British seamen. The toll impressment demanded from British seafaring communities was far greater than that exacted on the United States. During the two decades under examination, it is estimated that half of all British seamen in the Royal Navy were enrolled via the impress service. That is approximately 600,000 seamen compared to the 15,000 or so Americans who found themselves laboring under the Union Jack.<sup>8</sup> Undoubtedly impressment was

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel James Ennis, *Enter the Press gang: Naval Impressment in Eighteenth-Century British Literature* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 2002), 39 – 40.

<sup>8</sup> The average number of seamen needed per year during the Anglo-French Wars was 120,000. With a turnover rate each year of fifty per cent, an average of 60,000 men were needed every year and half of those men, 30,000, came from the impress service. Britain and France warred for twenty years, so nearly 600,000 seamen were enrolled via press gang. Kemp, *The British Sailor*, 99-103, 162-63;

difficult for Britons, but in many important ways, American sailors experienced even greater hardship in the Royal Navy. Yet even historians who argue for the importance of impressment during the early republic, like James F. Zimmerman or Reginald Horsman, have little or nothing to say about the seamen themselves. One attempt has been made to illustrate what impressment was like for the American Jack Tar who found himself seized. Claire Phelan's doctoral dissertation claims to "present the terrible personal consequences" of impressment for American seamen. There are times when Phelan's scholarship is cogent, but she loses her focus. Her dissertation devolves into anecdotes about sailors and their families before transforming into an argument about the culpability of the United States government in perpetuating impressment through lackluster diplomacy.<sup>9</sup>

In order to appreciate what impressment was truly like, it is necessary to engage these deck hands and gain a better understanding of the nature and character of impressment from those men who experienced it first-hand. The perception of seamen is that because they were of the lower sort, they were generally under-politicized and a voiceless segment of the American populace. Fortunately, the impressment controversy gave them a voice. The process of securing release from the Royal Navy began with an American writing an appeal to an Agent for the Relief of American Seamen, an American consul, or the Department of State. Although the common view of seamen as illiterate is not entirely baseless, Ira Dye compiled a literacy chart of American seamen based off their ability or inability to sign their names when applying for a protection certificate. Dye

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Christopher Lloyd, *The British Seaman, 1200 – 1860: A Social Survey* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1968), 112-93; Brunsman, "Evil Necessity," 381.

<sup>9</sup> Claire Phelan, "In the Vise of Empire: British Impressment of the American Sailor" (PhD. Dissertation, Texas Christian University, 2008), 6.

concluded, after analyzing hundreds of signatures, that roughly only 35 percent of American seamen were completely illiterate. Another 20 percent were educated enough to sign their own names, which Dye takes as evidence that a person could read and write a little. Finally, approximately 45 percent of American sailors were fully literate, with as much as half again considered educated.<sup>10</sup> That means that more than half of the seamen impressed by the Royal Navy either had the ability to begin the appeal process or sign their name to an appeal petition begun by a fellow shipmate. Of course, the ability to do so did not guarantee that such action was possible. As will be demonstrated, there were a fair number of British captains who did not care for the idea of their crew writing to American government representatives. For those men who were able to write, however, penning their appeal was the critical first step in obtaining their release and it is probable that the majority of those who could, took such action.

The appeal was often followed by a flurry of documents as family, friends, and employers attempted to provide the U.S. government with the necessary evidence to establish their loved one's citizenship to obtain his release. There are thousands of letters that provide intimate, personal accounts of what impressment was like and the toll it exacted from its victims. In addition to these letters, several sailors who survived the rigors of British captivity wrote narratives detailing their tribulations. All these documents provide insight into the day-to-day existence for an American coerced into the service of the Royal Navy. The portrait painted is one of general misery. What also becomes clear is the inherent disadvantages of being an American pressed into the service of the British. Undoubtedly, the hardships suffered by United States citizens

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<sup>10</sup> Ira Dye, "Early American Merchant Seafarers," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 120, No. 5 (Oct. 1976), 340-348.

were what led Joshua Penny to warn his fellow sailors, “It is the duty of every American to avoid impressments in a British ship of war. It ought to be the first article of the impressed seaman’s creed that a British vessel of war is a Pandora’s box – a nefarious floating dungeon, freighting calamities to every part of this lower world.”<sup>11</sup> The misfortunes heaped on the men of the lower deck were many, but the seaman’s problems in many ways began with and were magnified by the term of service for a man pressed into the Royal Navy.

Unlike the United States Navy, where seamen enlisted for a period of one or two years, a Jack Tar in Britain faced a much longer term of service. As part of the effort to ease the manning problem of the Royal Navy, enlistments ran the duration of a ship’s commission (the time a vessel spent at sea before returning to Britain for refitting and repairs.) Sailors were often transferred between vessels, however, so the admiralty could avoid discharging an able seaman. The easiest way for a seaman to end his term of service was to get invalided.<sup>12</sup> The open-ended enlistment was difficult for British mariners, especially during this period, when Great Britain and France were at war for decades with only one brief hiatus in hostilities. Indefinite service was difficult for Englishmen and unbearable for Americans. Jacob Potter was in the service eight years; “I have been a long time in this ship . . . I have wrote a great many letters to my consul . . . I was an American and likewise I was a citizen and besides I had a wife and family.”<sup>13</sup> Regardless of Potter’s many letters and repeated appeals, he continued aboard a British

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<sup>11</sup> Joshua Penny, *The Adventure of Joshua Penny, a Native of Southold, Long Island, Suffolk County, New York, Who Was Impressed into British Service*, (Brooklyn, NY: Spooner Press, 1815), 1 – 39.

<sup>12</sup> Rodger, *Wooden World*, 145-152.

<sup>13</sup> Jacob Potter to unknown, letter, 11 November 1811; John Briggs file; RG 59: 928.

man-of-war and his wife and family remained a distant memory. Elizabeth Hirst wrote to James Madison in 1805 to inform the Secretary of State that after more than a decade of trying, the government could cease efforts to secure the release of her husband, William. The Royal Navy took him in 1793. Twelve years on, Elizabeth assumed that he had perished. The government obliged Hirst's wishes. The fact that William's file was never reopened indicates that she was correct and after more than a decade away, Hirst died without ever seeing his family again.<sup>14</sup> John Conyers was more fortunate than Hirst in that his time with the Royal Navy did not end in a watery grave, but thirteen years after he was seized by a press gang he had no hope of release. Conyers' wife Hannah was eager for his return, despite her own hardships in his absence. "It has been a very long while since I saw you . . . you may suppose it has been very difficult to provide sustenance for myself and family since you have been gone, but the sight of you ever more will sufficiently repay me for all the trouble I have had since you were here."<sup>15</sup> Thirteen years was extraordinarily long, but if an American could not obtain his release within a few weeks of being pressed, the appeal process almost guaranteed his time in the Royal Navy was measured in years. Letters and documents had to travel back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean and by the time the Board of the Admiralty decided the appellant was an American and ordered his release from service, two or three years could have easily passed. Even then, the war against France was a global affair and Britain had interests to protect on every continent and in every ocean. The Admiralty was in London, the ship on which the freed sailor served could be half a world away. By the time word of his release finally reached a man, years more could have slipped by.

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<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Hirst to James Monroe, letter, date unknown; William Hirst file; RG 59: 928.

<sup>15</sup> Hannah Conyers to John Conyers, letter, 26 July 1811; John Conyers file; RG 59: 928.

One of the key differences between an impressed American and an Englishman in His Majesty's service is hinted at in these letters. While enlistments were indefinite, men were granted shore leave; they could return to their homes, visit with their families, set their affairs in order, or just carouse about town before returning to duty. As the Anglo-French Wars dragged on year after year and desertion became an increasing concern for the Royal Navy, leave grew less and less common. In exchange, however, the Admiralty grew lax in regulations concerning the presence of women on board, particularly wives. Periods of leave, however rare, and spousal visits were granted when a man-of-war was in an English port, and not when a vessel reached the United States. Obtaining shore leave or having women below deck may have provided a pressed man with an enjoyable change of pace, but it obviously did little to alleviate the familial loneliness suffered by pressed Americans or the difficulties of their loved ones in the States.<sup>16</sup>

Liberty ashore was never guaranteed, though, and even in distant ports like Port Mahan or Kingstown, many impressed men were denied leave altogether. The denial was chiefly out of the fear that the tars planned to desert their ship, creating a situation where a vessel was short-handed, requiring a recruiting campaign or a press crew to compensate for the loss. From the British perspective, it was far easier to deny shore leave to impressed men.<sup>17</sup> "I have never been allowed to put my foot on shore since I was pressed which is now three years," lamented James Brown. "For God's sake release me if it is in your power . . . war will soon be declared shortly between the two nations . . . perhaps one day or other I should be able to avenge myself on those that now tyrannize

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<sup>16</sup> Kemp, *The British Sailor*, 167-172.

<sup>17</sup> Rodger, *Wooden World*, 137-144.

over me.”<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Daniel Parker spent five years aboard HMS *Valiant* and not once was he permitted to feel solid ground beneath his feet. George Rinehart was finally granted leave from his vessel after eight years confinement, but only because he lost his leg in combat. This extreme measure taken to ensure that men like Brown and Parker did not desert the service is indicative that impressed Americans experienced all the worst aspects of the practice. Of course, one of the main reasons Americans were often held in perpetual incarceration was because many refused to accept the King’s shilling.<sup>19</sup>

The King’s shilling was the monetary advance given to men who volunteered for the navy. If a pressed man took the small bounty, he was entered on the books as having volunteered for the Royal Navy. Impressed seamen wishing to end their captivity had two methods of escape – diplomatic channels and desertion. Diplomatic channels were closed to men who entered willingly, regardless of their nationality. The repercussions for a volunteer who deserted were severe – at the least, numerous lashes from the cat-o-nine-tails, at worst, death. The Royal Navy had no claim, however, on a man who refused the King’s shilling. Once the Lords of the Admiralty ruled that a pressed man was an American, he was to be released as soon as word reached his ship. An impressed American who did not wish to wait on diplomatic channels to secure his freedom could run from his ship. Once the runaway mariner was clear of his captors, he could sign on to serve aboard a merchantman, find sanctuary with a United States’ consulate, or enlist in

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<sup>18</sup> James Brown to Captain Joseph Thompson, letter, 1 November 1811; James Brown (CT) file; RG 59:928.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Parker to unknown, letter, 1812; Daniel Parker file; RG 59:928; A Return or List of American Seamen and Citizens who have been Impressed and held in Service on Board His Britannic Majesty’s Ship of War from 1<sup>st</sup> October to 31<sup>st</sup> December 1808; Quarterly Returns of Impressed Seamen, Oct. 1806 – Dec. 1809; Records of the Department of State, Record Grouping 59, Entry 932; National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, MD.

the US Navy, and the British had no right to reclaim him. Clearly, it was in the interest of seized Americans to not accept the bounty, except that men who refused often found themselves in the same situation as George Rinehart – inmates in a floating prison. Even beyond the possibility of the ship in which a man served becoming a watery jail for years on end, the repercussions of refusing to enter could be severe.<sup>20</sup>

A tar who did not enlist did not have to be paid. Granted, payment in the Royal Navy was often in arrears, no matter a sailor's nationality. The lack of payment was most often a retention technique rather than a budgetary issue, the theory being that if a tar was owed money he was less inclined to flee the service. This scheme did not have the desired effect, and payment was rarely more than a year past due and always paid in full to those seamen who stayed to collect. Americans declining to enter, however, were not necessarily being credited for their labor by the Admiralty. The concern was not that payment to these men was late; it was that sometimes there was no payment at all.<sup>21</sup>

John Barker was seized by a press gang in 1809 and rejected the bounty. After four years in the Royal Navy, Barker was sent to a prison ship for refusing to fight in the war against the United States. During Barker's four years' service, he received "neither . . . wages nor prize money." For obvious reasons, this did not sit well with Barker and upon gaining release from prison, he related to his parents, "I expect [sic] to enter into the States Service . . . as I have been obliged to serve the British I shall serve my own country with a good will for to pay them [the British] for old grievances as I had to

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<sup>20</sup> James Zimmerman, *The Impressment of American Seamen* (Port Washington, NY; Kennikat Press, 1963), 57-62, 70-73.

<sup>21</sup> Kemp, *The British Sailor*, 27-31, 212 – 213.

pay.”<sup>22</sup> Richard Butler did not vow vengeance on Great Britain as Barker did, but Butler did serve for twelve years aboard a man-of-war and during that period was never given his wages or his share of prize money because of his refusal to take the King’s shilling. It was Butler’s hope that the American Consulate in London could claim the wages that were due to him now that he had been proven an American. Being a pauper in the Royal Navy could be hard on Americans. They often relied on the generous nature of their shipmates in times of need. As will be illustrated in the next chapter, seamen’s lost wages bore an even heavier burden for dependent families left behind in the United States.<sup>23</sup>

Many captains did not enjoy the idea of having a hand aboard ship that had not been entered in the ship’s books. Some officers went to great lengths to coerce pressed men into accepting the bounty. Samuel Corbin related to American Consul John Harker that the officers “threaten to Hang me if I don’t enter which I never will do as long as I breathe.”<sup>24</sup> Several American merchant captains conveyed to the State Department the means by which nearly seventy American seamen were pressed into the service of HMS *Hermione*. On the Fourth of July, 1802, the *Hermione* entered the port of Jeremie on the island of Hispanoila and swept the docks of American sailors gathered together to celebrate independence. Once in British custody, the pressed men “were kept for the space of forty-eight hours without receiving any sustenance in order to compel the said American seamen to enter on board the *Hermione*,” which seemed an effective method,

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<sup>22</sup> John Barker to Caleb Barker, letter, 11 September 1813; John Barker file; RG 59:928.

<sup>23</sup> A Return or List of American Seamen and Citizens who have been Impressed and held in Service on Board His Britannic Majesty’s Ship of War from 1<sup>st</sup> July to 30<sup>th</sup> September 1809; RG 59:932.

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Corbin to John Harker, letter, 19 February 1810; Samuel Corbin file; RG 59:928.

as only five of the seventy men seized were returned to their original vessels.<sup>25</sup> Joseph Taylor also experienced pangs of hunger when he was denied all provision except bread and water. The British also repeatedly beat him as part of the effort to force Taylor to volunteer. Robert Taylor received two floggings after he refused to enlist in the Royal Navy and was kept in irons every night.<sup>26</sup> James Tompkins, Samuel Davis, William Young, and John Brown were all seized together by the press crew of HMS *Acteon*. Once aboard, the captain gave the men an alternative, enlist or “live on oat-meal and water, and receive five dozen lashes.” When all four men refused to enter, each received their five dozen. Two days later, Tompkins and his mates felt the cat’s sting twelve more times before they were “taken below and put in irons . . . and the captain said he would punish the damn’d Yankee rascals until they did enter. We were then put in irons and laid in irons three months.” Presumably Captain Davis also made good on his threat to feed them nothing but oatmeal and water.<sup>27</sup>

It is not surprising that Royal Navy officers used the whip to try and force their will on American seamen. Discipline was the backbone of the His Majesty’s service where obedience was established through punishment and authority enforced by violence.<sup>28</sup> In the authoritarian wooden world of late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, violence was inherent in the system. One needs look no further than the Royal Navy’s Articles of War. The Articles were an extensive penal code that ship captains were required to read to their crews at least once a month, although most read them once

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<sup>25</sup> Affidavit sworn by Cyprian Cook and Elijah Clark; David Parker file, RG 59:928.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Taylor file, RG 59:928; Robert Taylor file, RG 59:928.

<sup>27</sup> “Poughkeepsie,” *Baltimore Patriot*, 17 April 1813.

<sup>28</sup> Peter Earle, *Sailors: English Merchant Seamen, 1650 – 1775* (London: Methuen, 1998), 159.

a week. The Articles detailed the repercussions for a seamen (or officer) who failed to do their duty or broke discipline. Most infractions, from as serious as mutiny to as common as theft, were punishable by death. Captains were given considerable leeway in deciding the sentencing of their crews, and the more serious crimes were often tried by court martial. Since the Articles of War granted captains and courts the right to meet out justice as they saw fit, sentencing varied greatly, but traditional punishment included ducking, weighting, and keel-hauling; each more cruel than the last.

Flogging from a cat-o-nine tails, however, was far and away the most common use of force in the Royal Navy. Nearly every offence – even cursing – carried the penalty of lashes, with the minimum number allotted being twelve. David Bunnell was pressed twice into British service and during his time became well acquainted with the cat; “There were so many offences punishable by flogging . . . it was next to an impossibility to ‘steer clear.’ If we looked cross at an officer, we were flogged – if we struck one, hung – if we did not make sail quite quick enough, all flogged.” Bunnell continued, “I have seen one hundred flogged before breakfast – myself one of the number. In short, it made no difference whether we did right or wrong, we were flogged just as it suited the whim of an officer.”<sup>29</sup> The most severe whipping, however, was to be “flogged around the fleet” and was a sentence handed down only by court martial. A seaman flogged around the fleet was rowed from ship to ship and whipped in front of each crew in the squadron. In such instances the number of lashes ran well into the hundreds and more often than not

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<sup>29</sup> David C. Bunnell, *The Travels and Adventures of David C. Bunnell During Twenty-Three Years of a Sea-Faring Life; Containing an Accurate Account of the Battle on Lake Erie, Under the Command of Com. Oliver H. Perry; Together with Ten Years Service in the Navy of the United States, Also Service Among the Greeks, Imprisonment Among the Turks, &c., &c.* (Palmyra, NY: J.H. Bortles, 1831), 95.

being flogged around the fleet was the equivalent of the death penalty.<sup>30</sup> Those, like James Durand, who witnessed a flogging around the fleet never forgot the brutality they saw.

The cruelty I saw daily inflicted on poor Americans, while on board this ship, was enough to fill the stoutest minds with horror. There was a court martial held upon three persons on board this ship 9th of May 1812: two of them were Englishmen, the other an American. The crime alleged was desertion; and after a trial of four hours, they received sentence – each Englishman being sentenced to 250 lashes, and the American 300. . . the American, whose name was Armstrong, received the first 25 lashes, the next, William Smith, 18 lashes, and then Benjamin Miller 18 lashes, and so on from ship to ship, receiving a number of stripes at each . . . and as John Armstrong was along side the last ship receiving the lashes, he expired from the severity of their chastisement; and they gave him ten lashes after death.<sup>31</sup>

There are historians who deemphasize the violent nature of the Royal Navy, calling it “an organic response to the nature of life at sea,” that was largely accepted by the men. In support of this argument, the fact that flogging was not listed among seamen’s grievances during the mutiny at Spithead is often cited. While it is true that the discipline structure was not part of the sailors’ demanded reforms at Spithead, that same year mutineers at the Nore demanded a revision of the Articles of War. Additionally, the mutinies on both the *Bounty* and *Hermione*, perhaps the two most famous crew uprisings in naval history, were a direct result of tyrannical violence. Discipline was harsh in the Royal Navy and it cannot be dismissed as being in “proper proportion . . . in a cruel and brutal age.”<sup>32</sup> Granted, not every captain was a Pigot (*Hermione*) or a Bligh (*Bounty*), but

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<sup>30</sup> Rodger, *Wooden World*, 211-29.

<sup>31</sup> James R. Durand, *The Life and Adventures of James R. Durand, During a Period of Fifteen Years from 1801 – 1816: In Which He Was Impressed on Board the British Fleet and Held in Detestable Bondage for More than Seven Years* (Rochester, NY: 1820), 67.

<sup>32</sup> Rodger, *Wooden World*, 229; Kemp, *The British Sailor*, 173-75; Lloyd, *The British Seaman*, 231; Isaac Land, *War, Nationalism, and the British Sailor, 1750 – 1850* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 97 – 104.

the tenderness and humanity of Jack Aubrey is a work of fiction.<sup>33</sup> Joshua Davis, describing the risks of an impressed American writing letters to home, explained the tendencies found in British ship captains; “If the officer happens to be of the disposition of a Washington, he will tell the man never to do the like again; but if he should prove to that of a Nero, the man is ordered to be put in irons until a time is set by the court of inquiry for the writer’s destiny and all of this merely for attempting to let his friends know his unhappy situation. There are nine Neros in the British navy to one Washington.”<sup>34</sup>

The British service was not alone in its liberal practice of flogging – most navies held discipline as paramount to success and physical punishment as the surest means of commanding obedience. The US Navy was no exception and employed the cat to enforce regulations, but the scope and scale of the practice in the United States paled in comparison to the Royal Navy. A US Navy captain could not order more than twelve lashes as punishment – any heavier sentence had to be decided by court martial – and two thirds of all floggings between 1794 – 1815 amount to a dozen or less. It is approximated that only one in thirty-six seamen in the US Navy was flogged and the average number of lashes given was six. It was also rare for a flogging in the United States service to reach into the triple digits.<sup>35</sup> Undoubtedly the US Navy’s recruitment technique, as compared to the Royal Navy’s, had some role in tempering the authoritarian violence. The US Navy was a volunteer force, with relatively short enlistment terms; if a seaman did not

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<sup>33</sup> Captain Jack Aubrey is the protagonist in the Patrick O’Brien Aubrey/Maturin novels, and as a ship commander he spares his men from floggings unless absolutely necessary.

<sup>34</sup> Penny, *The Adventure of Joshua Penny*, 74.

<sup>35</sup> Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the U.S. Naval Officer Corps, 1794 – 1815* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 241-65.

appreciate his treatment, or thought he was being ill-used, he was never too far away from his enlistment expiring. A volunteer navy with a reputation for violent and stern discipline had little hope in recruiting enough able seamen to man the fleet. It is true that the US Navy often struggled to man its vessels with a full compliment, but that was more a result of higher wages in the merchant marine than the discipline structure. During both Jefferson's Embargo and Madison's pre-war embargo, the US Navy had no shortage of volunteers. So while the US Navy employed the cat-o-nine tails as punishment, the Royal Navy discipline structure appears to have been both more brutal and employed more frequently. American seamen who served in both navies provide ample evidence of the disparity between the two navies in their letters and writings.

John Hall was pressed into the service of HMS *Spectre* and after a botched escape attempt was ordered flogged a dozen times. Hall had received three lashes from the cat before begging for the punishment to stop, "Captain, we Americans can't bear flogging like Englishmen," he cried, "we are not used to it."<sup>36</sup> Three more lashes and Hall fainted. When Americans like John Hall suddenly found themselves pressed into British service, the arbitrariness and severity of the physical abuse doled out by the Royal Navy shocked them. Samuel Holbrook was lucky enough to never undergo flogging during his period of British incarceration, but he witnessed enough whippings that the memory was etched into his mind. "At the first three or four blows the cries and entreaties of the poor wretch are heart-rending, crying out, O God Almighty, save me! O Jesus Christ, have mercy upon me! Many a time I have heard these piercing cries while the flesh on the back was cut into strips."<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Churchill was not as fortunate as Holbrook and suffered the

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<sup>36</sup> Penny, *The Adventure of Joshua Penny*, 26.

cat multiple times. “It is nothing but a word and blow here and flogging at the least fault,” this unhappy son wrote to his parents.<sup>38</sup> Aboard Churchill’s vessel, like Joshua Davis’s, letter writing was a dangerous proposition, “If they know of any American in their Service to write Either home or to the Consul they will punish them most Severely . . . treating them with all the Cruelties they can Torment.”<sup>39</sup> David Bunnell likewise testified to the risks in letter writing; after Bunnell was caught penning his appeal to an American Consulate, he received a dozen lashes, saw his letter destroyed, and was promised worse if he attempted to win his freedom again. The reason for John Cunningham’s turn under the cat was beyond his understanding; “I had not been but three days on board before I was tyed up and flogged like a doge for nothing.”<sup>40</sup> Similarly, L.C. Wilkinson was whipped for a minor offense: “The usage is Intolerable . . . they began to treat me with the worst of usage . . . beating me for no offense whatsoever . . . I was Punished for not Being so smart as they wished when I was very ill at the Time, they Gave me dozens of Lashes with a Cat –of – nine tails.”<sup>41</sup> John M’Lean’s treatment in the Royal Navy was no different. M’Lean was impressed twice in four years and flogged multiple times for being cheeky with an officer or not attending to his duties quick enough, and at least once for performing his tasks too quickly. “While getting under

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<sup>37</sup> Samuel Holbrook, *Threescore Years: An Autobiography, Containing Incidents of Voyages and Travels, Including Six Years in a Man-of-War*: (Boston: James French and Company, 1857), 41.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin Churchill to Joseph Churchill, letter, 7 July 1794; Benjamin Churchill file; RG 59:928.

<sup>39</sup> Henry Conway to Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States, and Gentlemen of Congress, letter, 10 October 1808; Henry Conway file; RG 59:928.

<sup>40</sup> John Cunningham to Katherine Cunningham, letter, 10 March 1797; Silas Talbot Papers; G.W. Blunt White Library, Mystic Seaport, Mystic, CT.

<sup>41</sup> L.C. Wilkinson to Thomas Jefferson, President of the Unites States, letter, 12 October 1808; L.C. Wilkinson file; RG 59: 928.

weigh, I was busy hauling in a buoy rope; the lieutenant came to me and said ‘D\_\_m you, don’t haul,’ and struck me with a speaking trumpet; knocked out two of my teeth, and cut my face shockingly, and caused much effusion of blood.”<sup>42</sup> John Mitchell and several shipmates petitioned George Washington for relief from “a Bloody Brutle Man of War . . . out of that Bloody hands of a tyrannical British King. . . . We are used like dogs and the Best words we can have from them is you Yankee Rascal, [you] shall suffer for last war.”<sup>43</sup> George Hobbs undoubtedly suffered. Merchant captain Samuel Morris related how Hobbs was pressed onto HMS *Experiment* and once on board his “life was despaired of, the mate having cut him in the arm, in two places in the Right thigh to the bone, and also the Sinews of the Right hand fingers, with a Cutlass, and that should Hobbs survive [the ship surgeon] doubts he will ever be able to gain a livelihood by laboring means.”<sup>44</sup> What happened to George Hobbs in the end is uncertain, but both the American Consul in Kingston and Captain Morris thought the injuries mortal. If Hobbs did perish in the British service, he shared the fate of many of his countrymen.

Great Britain was at war. In any discussion about the hardships faced by American seamen in the Royal Navy, it is imperative to not lose sight of that most basic fact, because war meant casualties. An untold number of Americans were maimed or killed in British service. Over the course of the Napoleonic wars, the manning needs of the Royal Navy required an average of 113,000 seamen each year to man the fleet. The

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<sup>42</sup> James M’Lean, *Seventeen Years’ History, of the Life and Sufferings of James M’Lean an Impressed American Citizen & Seaman; Embracing But a Summary of What He Endured While Detained In the British Service During that Long and Painful Period*: (Hartford, CT: B & J Russell, 1814), 7-14, quote 14.

<sup>43</sup> John Mitchell to George Washington, President of the United States, petition, 2 September 1795; John Mitchell file; RG 59:928.

<sup>44</sup> Testimonial of Captain Samuel Morris; Samuel Morris file; RG 59:928.

turn over ration in the navy was approximately fifty percent; about ten percent of which represented men killed in battle or dead from disease, another ten to fifteen percent deserted, meaning twenty-five to thirty percent were invalided every year from battle wounds or illness.<sup>45</sup> There is no compelling evidence to believe that those Americans who were unable to secure their release after being impressed did not suffer similar losses, although desertion numbers may have been lower since more often than not, these men had nowhere to run. Established in the previous chapter, approximately 15,000 Americans fell victim to the press, of whom less than 3,000 obtained their release through the State Department or American Agents. Roughly 4,000 men, then, were killed or wounded fighting the French on behalf of Great Britain. Unfortunately, it is difficult to give voice to those men who died either from fighting England's enemies or as a result of the many ship-borne illnesses that ravaged the navy. The records of Silas Talbot, West Indies relief agent, reveal some of the circumstances that the men had to withstand. "The mortality here on board the King's Ships and among the land forces is beyond all conception. The Majestic at Fort Royal has lost in six weeks 225 [of 700] of her crews." Talbot complained specifically of the high death rate among Americans in the Royal Navy, "I find by Inquiry that a considerable number of those our Seamen . . . are kill'd and others died from Sickness."<sup>46</sup> Joshua Penny was impressed onto HMS *Alligator* in the West Indies, along with thirty-nine other Americans. Once aboard the *Alligator*, Penny and the other men learned that yellow fever had ravaged the ship – within one day

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<sup>45</sup> Brunsmann, "Evil Necessity," 381; Rodger, *Wooden World*, 188 – 204, 359; Dudley Pope, *Life in Nelson's Navy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 131-37.

<sup>46</sup> Silas Talbot to Timothy Pickering, letter, 17 October 1796; Talbot to Pickering, letter, 22 December 1796; Silas Talbot papers; G.W. Blunt White Library.

of being pressed eleven of the forty men had contracted the disease and died.<sup>47</sup> Death among impressed Americans was so common that some consulates and Agents found it was noteworthy only when a man died from causes other than battle and disease, such as when Samuel Spies went down with the shipwrecked HMS *Biter* or when Thomas Robinson died after falling from a main yard arm.<sup>48</sup> The sea was dangerous, an untamed wilderness where the specter of death was a constant presence. Seamen who worked upon the ocean were well aware of the risks they incurred every time they stepped on board a vessel.

American tars who survived the rigors of battle, the dangers of sea, and ship-born diseases made it known that they resented fighting in a war that their own nation had no part in. Lewis Bancey abhorred the idea of participating in a “fight . . . against those that are not my enemies with the desperate prospect before me of losing my life or some limb on the service of a power which has no claim on my service.”<sup>49</sup> A group of Americans aboard the *Hermione* submitted a petition to the State Department that related, “we now are kept on board his Majesty Ship the *Hermione* against our inclination, having been asked by the Commander of the said ship if we were willing to enter into his Britannic service, but having no inclination to fight for any country but our own, we one and all refused.”<sup>50</sup> Of course, their refusal did them little good and it is almost certain that some,

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<sup>47</sup> Penny, *The Adventures of Joshua Penny*, 10-11.

<sup>48</sup> A Return or List of American Seamen and Citizens who have been Impressed and held in Service on Board His Britannic Majesty’s Ship of War from 1<sup>st</sup> October to 31<sup>st</sup> December 1805; A Return or List of American Seamen and Citizens who have been Impressed and held in Service on Board His Britannic Majesty’s Ship of War from 1<sup>st</sup> April to 30<sup>th</sup> June 1809; RG 59:932. RG 59:932.

<sup>49</sup> Lewis Bancey to Samuel Turner, letter, 12 September 1812; Lewis Bancey file; RG 59:928.

<sup>50</sup> Richard Stubbs to Jonathan Drayton, Speaker of the House of Representatives, petition, 3 May 1796; Edward Clawson file; RG 59:928.

if not all, of these men participated in the 1797 mutiny. In a similar petition, more than a dozen Americans from HMS *Princess* declared, we are made “to fight for England a Country which we abhor. If we do fight, let us fight as our forefathers did for Liberty, not for Tyranny, we are afraid we should be obliged to do it greatly against our Inclinations.”<sup>51</sup>

Even worse than being forced to war against France and Napoleon, some Americans found themselves in 1812 compelled to fight against the United States. Jeremiah Culver was serving aboard HMS *Shannon* with the outbreak of war between Great Britain and the United States looming. He penned a desperate appeal for his release: “What makes me more than ordinary anxious for my discharge tho’ I can assure you sir that a man of war is at the best but an unhappy and unpleasant life, is that there is so much talk of war between American and England . . . I should be forced to serve against my own country which Sir I assure you is the last thing I should ever wish to be compelled to do.”<sup>52</sup> A little over a year later, the *Shannon* was victorious in a single ship-to-ship action with the USS *Chesapeake*. Culver’s appeal file does not indicate that he was released from British service, so it is highly probable that he participated in the engagement that killed sixty Americans. The majority of American seamen serving on a British vessel when the War of 1812 was declared surrendered themselves as American citizens and prisoners of war. It was at the discretion of individual ship captains whether or not to accept these sailors as prisoners. James Bolton was among the unlucky who

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<sup>51</sup> William Levell to James Monroe, Secretary of State, petition, 21 March 1809; William Levell file; RG 59:928.

<sup>52</sup> Jeremiah Culver to Jeremiah Huntingdon, letter, 1 January 1812; Jeremiah Culver file; RG 59:928.

found their surrender refused and was “compelled by the most brutal treatment to fight the battle of the enemy against his country and his friends.”<sup>53</sup>

When impressed seamen of the United States considered their circumstances – perpetual service, lost wages, confinement, physical coercion most often in the form of flogging, and death, misery, and sickness surrounding them – a great many viewed themselves as nothing less than slaves. “Being a true born American I think it very hard to be dragged into Slavery by a Nation to whom I don’t belong,” opined one seamen, while another implored to be “Released from the State of Slavery that we are at Present in.”<sup>54</sup> Perhaps Henry Conway pleaded his condition most eloquently when he addressed Congress, “Now Gentlemen I humbly submit to your consideration If I am Still to be Inslaved or Thus Deprived of that [liberty] Purchased by the Blood of My Forefathers and relations and that Which I hourly pine after.”<sup>55</sup>

Was impressment slavery? Some historians are convinced that it was. Jesse Lemisch believes that the comparisons made between impressment and slavery are appropriate and accurate. “Ultimately the justification for impressment is no nobler than that which its defenders could offer for American Negro slavery (there are many parallels).”<sup>56</sup> More plain is Marcus Rediker, who writes bluntly, “impressment was slavery.”<sup>57</sup> Future chapters will discuss the rhetorical uses of impressment and slavery as

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<sup>53</sup> Daniel Gardiner to James Monroe, Secretary of State, letter, 30 May 1815; James Bolton file, RG 59:928.

<sup>54</sup> Stephen Simmon to John Hawker, letter, 29 March 1810; RG 59:128; James Draper to unknown, date unknown; James Draper file; RG 59:92.

<sup>55</sup> Henry Conway to Thomas Jefferson, letter, 10 October 1808; Henry Conway file, RG 59:928.

<sup>56</sup> Jesse Lemisch, *Jack Tar vs. John Bull: The Roll of New York’s Seamen in Precipitating the Revolution* (New York: Gardland, 1997), 16.

employed by newspaper editors and politicians, but the focus in this chapter will remain the lived experience of American seamen.

A handful of men had the misfortune to suffer through both impressment and chattel slavery in North America. George Jemmison, Henry Smothers, William Wakefield, and David Smith were all intimately familiar with the institution of slavery in the United States. Once free, these men earned a living serving aboard American merchantmen and were eventually impressed into the Royal Navy. Although these men petitioned for their release and wished to return to the United States, none of them compared their situation to slavery. Furthermore, two slaves, Briton Hammon and John Marrant, went immediately from a state of slavery to impressment. Rather than viewing the experiences as synonymous, Hammon and Marrant found service in the Royal Navy liberating. In fact, Hammon used a British press gang operating in the West Indies to escape from slavery, and Marrant's only complaint about life in the Royal Navy was "that a lamentable stupor crept over all my spiritual vivacity, life and vigor."<sup>58</sup> Clearly, for men who had experience chattel slavery there was no comparison to forced service in the British Navy.

The overwhelming majority of impressed Americans, however, were not of African descent and had no personal experience with slavery. What American seamen did know is that the Royal Navy had deprived them of their liberty. Paul Gilje examines the meaning of liberty to the American sailors and argues that the concept was of the

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<sup>57</sup> Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000), 110.

<sup>58</sup> Briton Hammon, *A Narrative of the Sufferness and Deliverance of Briton Hammon*, Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/hammon>, (accessed 2 February 2011); John Marrant, *A Narrative of the Lord's Wonderful Dealings with John Marrant, a Black*, Documenting the American South, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/marrant>, (accessed 2 February 2011).

utmost importance to Jack Tar in the immediate and real sense of the word. “The concept of ‘liberty’ . . . ordinarily had a very specific meaning for common seamen . . . ‘liberty’ meant individual freedom, then and there.”<sup>59</sup> The American seaman was willing to sacrifice many of his freedoms while serving before the mast, but he gave them freely. When a sailor’s liberty was unceremoniously taken from him it was a gross violation of his personal rights. Additionally, seamen have been described as “one of the largest and most important groups of free wage laborers in the international market economy of eighteenth century.”<sup>60</sup> Impressment stood in opposition to free wage ideology. Jack Tar at the turn of the nineteenth century may not have had a sophisticated understanding of wage labor ideology, but he did understand that when he was seized by a press gang he lost the ability to negotiate his pay in a competitive labor environment. Instead of plying his trade in the relatively lucrative employment of the merchant fleet, his labor was taken from him for little or no pay. The simple freedoms that these men were used to, such as shore leave, were denied them; and, as established, even letter writing, for those who could write, was often punishable. Flogging itself was not something that the majority of Americans were used to and being whipped was certainly a practice that, in the United States at least, was heavily associated with chattel slavery. Perhaps impressment was not slavery in the technical sense of the word, or at least it is not fully comparable to the institution of African chattel slavery in America. After all these sailors were not property, their children were not condemned to the same fate, and they still had certain rights that had to be respected. Impressment was exploitative, though, and Jack Tar’s perception of

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<sup>59</sup> Paul Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront : American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 127.

<sup>60</sup> Rediker, *Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, 77.

himself as enslaved is an important component to understanding impressment as a lived experience.

Not every seamen experienced impressment in the same way. Despite the hardships faced by most impressed Americans, some had no complaints of their service in the Royal Navy. Jacob Freeman was a cabin boy pressed onto the *Guerriere* and wrote to the federal government, “though I am in the British service I am very well used, better than their own subjects.”<sup>61</sup> While Daniel Reynolds did not embrace the Royal Navy, he did instruct his uncle to “Send me a protection the First Lieutenant will do every thing that lies in his Power for me for he is the Best Friend I have.”<sup>62</sup> Benjamin Burnham was seized by a press crew while at the Downs and put aboard HMS *Argo*. The British were satisfied enough with Burnham’s seamanship that he was made a petty officer. Burnham reported that he was very well treated during his time in the Royal Navy, yet he still applied to the United States government to secure his release.<sup>63</sup> There are perhaps a dozen other examples of Americans who reported their treatment favorably, but still petitioned for their freedom. Even these men, who had no complaint regarding their living conditions, the violence aboard ship, or any other aspect of the Royal Navy, believed impressment was unacceptable because it violated their rights as citizens of the United States.

American seamen understood what it meant to be a United States citizen better and sooner than most of their countrymen. The forging of a collective national identity in

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<sup>61</sup> Jacob Freeman file, RG 59:928.

<sup>62</sup> Daniel Reynolds to Samuel Reynolds, letter, 7 August 1809; Daniel Reynolds file; RG 59:928.

<sup>63</sup> A Return or List of American Seamen and Citizens who have been Impressed and held in Service on Board His Britannic Majesty’s Ship of War from 1<sup>st</sup> July to 30<sup>th</sup> September 1809, RG 59:932.

the wake of independence was not an overnight process – even the ratification of the Constitution in 1787 did not dispel the fierce localism of many Americans. Seamen, however, were quick to embrace their new nationalism. Paul Gilje argues that the nature of a life at sea made for questionable loyalty in American seamen. He concedes that seamen were dedicated to the egalitarianism spread by the Age of Revolution and were fierce advocates of liberty, but the liberty of Gilje’s Jack Tar is individualistic and self serving. Gilje views seamen as politically weak and unreliable; capable of fierce showings of patriotism, but also quick serve the highest bidder, or avoid service altogether if it was disagreeable.<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, Daniel Hicks, in his doctoral dissertation, posits that prior to the War of 1812, seamen were citizens more of the Atlantic world than the United States. Like Gilje, Hicks views the American Jack Tar as uncertain in his nationality and willing to “switch their national allegiances – temporarily or permanently, officially or informally – when favorable opportunities to do so arose.” In Hicks’ estimation, it was only after American naval success in the War of 1812 that seamen established themselves as a bedrock of American nationalism.<sup>65</sup> Rather viewing Jack Tar’s experiences in the Atlantic world prior to 1812 as a hindrance to embracing his new national identity, as Gilje and Hicks maintain, the life led by American seamen should instead be viewed as a catalyst to this group accepting new nationalist ideas.

Benedict Anderson’s work on nationalism describes “a deep, horizontal comradeship” that forms a sense of community and he aligns the emergence of nationalism with common cultural systems. Jack Tar was highly mobile; he moved from

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<sup>64</sup> Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront*, 127-162

<sup>65</sup> Daniel Hicks, “True Born Columbians: The Promises and Perils of National Identity for American Seafarers of the Early Republican Period,” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Pennsylvania State University, 2007), 1-34, quote, 16-17.

port to port, worked with men from all over the country, and sailed (usually) under the American flag. How better for a man to form a lasting bond with his countrymen than to brave the dangers of the sea with them? More than a fraternity of tars emerged from such experiences, a community of Americans grew. Certainly, American seamen were not above serving aboard a merchant vessel from England or France, but does the tendency to pursue higher wages reflect a rejection or confusion of nationalism, or does it demonstrate acumen in a competitive wage labor market? Additionally, serving in foreign vessels, with foreign sailors, helped to solidify the sense of nationalism American seamen felt rather than cloud it. Anderson argues that true nationalism is born out of large cultural systems; as Jack Tar traversed the Atlantic world, his exposure to alien cultures must have deepened his appreciation for the freedoms and familiarities of life at home.<sup>66</sup> Jack Tar demonstrated his appreciation by embracing his new national identity and responding each time his nation called. The service of American seamen in the Quasi War and the First Barbary War helped to demonstrate the loyalty of these men, which is reinforced by an examination of their writings together with an assessment of seamen's doggerel.

Jack Tar was quick to shield himself with his nationalism as he attempted to negotiate the diplomatic channels to freedom. Stephen Simmon explained to Consul John Hawker why his situation aboard HMS *Resolve* was so disagreeable: "Being a true born American I think it very hard to be dragged into Slavery by a Nation to whom I don't belong. The United States are universally acknowledged to be free and

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<sup>66</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso Press, 1983), 6-12.

independent, therefore I wish to know why our natural rites are to be trampled on.”<sup>67</sup>

Likewise, Robert Godman wrote an appeal on behalf of himself and three of his fellow Americans to James Madison that spoke plainly of their fidelity: “We as native born Citizens of America will ever Stick true to the thirteen stripes as the English Call it for we Shall ever think that our duty.” As far as Godman and his mates meekly submitting to English rule – “to which County I shall never do anything for as long as there is breath in my body” – he made it clear where they stood.<sup>68</sup> The petition of Asale Harris and twelve other Americans suffering on the Jamaica station emphasized both their nationality and their loyalty, “We are Americans bread and born and constant resideant [sic] there nor never sailed under no other colours but our American colours,” Harris explained.<sup>69</sup>

James M’Lean flourished his patriotism to defy English cruelty. After being bloodied by a Royal Navy officer and accused of faking his American citizenship to avoid his duty in the war against France, M’Lean, through broken teeth and a bloody mouth, spat back at the lieutenant, “No I am a true born American!”<sup>70</sup> Should such accounts be dismissed as pandering by men simply looking to improve their lot? Certainly they could be, except that American seamen did not simply express their patriotism in words, they proved it in action.

Seamen celebrated their nation. The maritime world was well represented in Philadelphia’s Grand Federal Procession of 1788 commemorating the ratification of the

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<sup>67</sup> Stephen Simmon to John Hawker, letter, 29 March 1810; Stephen Simmon file; RG 59:928.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Godman to James Madison, President of the United States, letter, 25 February 1812; Robert Godman file; RG 59:928.

<sup>69</sup> Asale Harris to John Adams, President of the United States, letter, 8 June 1799; Asale Harris file; RG 59:928.

<sup>70</sup> M’Lean, *Seventeen Years’ History*, 14.

new Constitution. An entire section of the parade was dedicated to the waterfront community. The leaders of the Marine Society headed the contingent, followed by the 20-gun ship *Union*. The *Union* was crewed by twenty-five men, including officers and common seamen. It was built on the barge of *Alliance*, captured by John Paul Jones and the *Bon Homme Richard* during the Revolution. Constructed in just four days, the *Union* was more than “a master-piece of elegant workmanship.” The ship was symbolic of the waterfront’s dedication to the United States. It was not a coincidence that the *Union* was built from the *Alliance*, nor was it happenstance that the Revolution’s greatest naval exploits by an American were represented by one of Jones’ prizes. The maritime community eagerly celebrated its role in the fight for independence and registered its support for the stronger centralized government. Additionally, the manning of the *Union* by representatives of all the waterfront community – the better-sort in Captain John Green, Esquire; the middling sort in the lieutenants and midshipmen; and the lower-sort in the common seamen – symbolized the egalitarianism blossoming in the new nation. All served the *Union* (and the Union) together – steering her along the right course. The *Union* was followed by pilots, boat builders, ship carpenters, sail makers, joiners, rope makers, and merchant traders. Together these men had built the *Union*, and together they would keep the Union afloat.<sup>71</sup>

Seamen continued to march in parades throughout the early republic era. Occasionally, they marched in Federalist parades, more often seamen aligned themselves with the Jeffersonians and joined in their festivities. Either way, sailors staked their claim to American nationalism and carved out a role for themselves as the bulwark of

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<sup>71</sup> Francis Hopkinson, “An Account of the Grand Federal Procession, Performed at Philadelphia on Friday the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 1788,” in *The Miscellaneous Essays and Occasional Writings of Francis Hopkinson, Esq.*, Vol. 2 (Philadelphia: 1792), 365-371.

American freedom that these men continually reemphasized. Seamen accomplished this not simply by celebrating their new nation, but also celebrated themselves.<sup>72</sup>

The Quasi War with France and the First Barbary War were both essentially naval conflicts and provided American seamen with the chance to demonstrate their commitment to their young country. Tars volunteered by the thousands to fight in the US Navy first against the French and then the Barbary pirates. During the Quasi War thousands more served aboard American privateers, as well. Although neither conflict proved decisive, each provided American seamen opportunities to fight and kill and die for their country. Seamen immortalized their nationalism in celebratory songs occasioned by the more glorious moments of the Quasi War and the Barbary War. The Quasi War's most memorable engagement was undoubtedly when Thomas Truxton and the USS *Constellation* defeated and captured the larger, stronger French frigate *L'Insurgente*. Jack Tar's role in the victory was emphasized in songs such as *Truxton's Victory, or Brave Yankee Boys*:

Come all you Yankee sailors with swords and pikes advance,  
'Tis time to try your courage and humble haughty France:  
The sons of France our seas invade,  
Destroy our commerce and our trade,  
'Tis time the reck'ning should be paid  
                    To brave Yankee boys . . . .  
Now here's a health to Truxton who did not fear the sight  
And all those Yankee sailors who for their country fight,  
John Adams in full bumpers toast,  
George Washington, Columbia's boast,  
And now to the girls that we love most,  
                    My brave Yankee boys.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> The importance of parades and similar celebrations in forging American nationalism has been thoroughly argued by David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820* (Chapel Hill, NC: Published for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture by the University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

In these verses, and throughout the song, the courage of American seamen was continually remembered. Moreover, sailors were established as America's loyal defenders and worthy of praise not only equal to their commander, Thomas Truxton, but also their President and the first American hero. Another song, also titled *Truxton's Victory*, called for all men to match the dedication of Jack Tar:

Americans, come man your ships,  
Fight for your country's cause!  
Maintain the honour of your flag,  
And fight for freedom's laws.<sup>74</sup>

American sailors had successfully defended the neutral shipping rights of the United States against France and sang songs so their fellow countrymen might not forget. Shortly after the conclusion of the Quasi War, however, Thomas Jefferson and the Democratic Republicans gained control of the White House and Congress and the US Navy was deployed to the Mediterranean. The First Barbary War was highlighted by the capture and then the burning of the USS *Philadelphia*, the capture of Derna, and the Battle of Tripoli Harbor. Once more American seamen returned home to celebrate their victory and solidify their place as true Columbians. The final verse to *The Siege of Tripoli* spoke to the status Jack Tar believed he had achieved:

Arise, arise, ye sprightly sons of mirth,  
And receive your protectors with open arms returning,  
And view the spoils they with their blood have bought,  
Columbia's flag high waving in the air,

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<sup>73</sup> *Truxton's Victory, or Brave Yankee Boys*; Broadside Ballads and Songs, Isaiah Thomas Collection; American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

<sup>74</sup> *Truxton's Victory*; Broadside Ballads and Songs, Isaiah Thomas Collection; American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

And the American seamen hence forward shall be pen'd,  
A terror to his foe, and an honor to his friends,  
From the scourge of Tripoli,  
Our children shall be free.<sup>75</sup>

The Quasi War and the Barbary War enabled sailors to both demonstrate and boast of their unflinching allegiance to the United States. Impressment further strengthened the nationalism of American seamen. Unique to Jack Tar, impressment made him dependent on the federal government – protection certificates were federal documents and once impressed a seaman appealed to the federal government for release. Localism meant nothing to an American sailor because it was not a man's status as a New Yorker or Virginian that might protect him from the press gang or free him from British incarceration; it was his standing as a citizen of the United States. Through impressment, American seamen came to understand and appreciate more fully the meaning of citizenship. Sailors learned firsthand the benefits of voluntary citizenship as opposed to the subservient nature of subjecthood and many were quick to comment.<sup>76</sup> David Bunnell was seized by a press gang while in Grenada, and once aboard the Royal Navy man of war, he recognized the foreignness of British service. "Behold me now pressed and dragged like a slave on board a vessel – and that too belonging to a nation that dare prostitute the name of LIBERTY." Bunnell's adventures, as he referred to them, saw him fall in love with his captain's niece, escape impressment, be pressed a second time,

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<sup>75</sup> *The Siege of Tripoli*; Broadside Ballads and Songs, Isaiah Thomas Collection; American Antiquarian Society.

<sup>76</sup> Denver Brunsmann also sees the nationalizing effect impressment had on seamen while also arguing that impressment was akin to forced migration and views the new group identity of American sailors as the direct result of their coerced movement. Denver Brunsmann, "Subjects vs. Citizens: Impressment and Identity in the Anglo-American Atlantic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 30 (Winter 2010): 557-586.

escape again, make his back to the United States and fight against the British in the War of 1812 aboard the USS *Constitution*. His time in the Royal Navy taught him a valuable lesson, though: “I have often shed a tear of regret, while reflecting upon that name so dear to me – INDEPENDENCE – of which my country could boast – to think that I was in a country when I did not dare to breathe it aloud. This was the first time I had known how to appreciate its value.”<sup>77</sup> Joshua Penny, likewise, came to fully understand the value of American freedom after years of coerced service on a British man of war. “Liberty is mocked by that nation which enslaves her subjects on pretence of rendering their condition more prosperous,” he wrote. “Compel a man whom you stile free, to abandon his wife, his children, and everything else he values in this world, to become your slave on shipboard. How dare you call that a land of freedom where this practice prevails countenanced by its laws! ‘Where liberty dwells, there is my country.’”<sup>78</sup> Penny, same as Bunnell, became an ardent defender of American liberty once he returned home, leading the citizens of East Hampton, New York in their fight against British raids and planning covert torpedo attacks against Royal Navy vessels anchored in Long Island Sound.

The protector of American liberties, a fierce foe to his nation’s enemies, and loyal to his countrymen – that is how Jack Tar viewed himself. Gilje and Hicks may question sailors’ motives and loyalties, but seamen prided themselves on their steadfastness and national service. Granted not every seamen was a veteran of the Quasi War or the Barbary War, but in the tight-knit waterfront communities of the early republic, success in war at sea became a source of pride for all (just as impressment was a shared

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<sup>77</sup> Bunnell, *Travels and Adventures of David C. Bunnell*, 46-47.

<sup>78</sup> Penny, *The Adventures of Joshua Penny*, 9.

grievance) and helped to form seamen's collective identity as the defender of American rights. Among the myriad of concerns British impressment raised, were the question of who guards the guardians? How best to protect the protectors? These concerns plagued four administrations. Many solutions were proposed and failed, and American tars continued to be "Prest and pushed about in a [British] Man of War, the Worst of Place which there is, a Hell on Earth."<sup>79</sup>

James Durand spent seven years in the Royal Navy and fought against the United States during the War of 1812, coerced into combat by the constant threat of hanging. He reflected on his experiences after being discharged and concluded, "I was taken on board their ship but did not think to be detained there for a term of seven years. Had I known my destiny that night I would have instantly committed that horrid crime of self-murder."<sup>80</sup> Durand was writing in hindsight and may have exaggerated his feelings of desperation three years after being freed from the Royal Navy – after all, his time as a pressed man may have been harsh, but he survived two wars and all the perils of a life at sea. Having studied the first-hand accounts of seamen incarcerated by the British, however, it has been illustrated that what these men experienced was service so arduous that for some impressment may have seemed a fate worse than death. Seamen were kept from their homes for years, subject to harsher discipline than many of them had ever encountered, faced the constant risk of death, and suffered a loss of personal liberty that led many sailors to view themselves as nothing less than slaves. For American seamen, at least, impressment was not a routine event in their lives on par with volunteer service. Hundreds of these men died, hundreds more were hospitalized or invalided, and all of

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<sup>79</sup> William Jeffrey to James Jeffrey, letter, 17 December 1808; William Jeffrey file; RG 59: 928.

<sup>80</sup> Durand, *The Life and Adventures of James R. Durand*, 22.

them suffered. The lived experience of impressment was unpleasant to say the least, and as will be shown in subsequent chapters, the misery of these tars and the public sympathy generated on their behalf were key factors in American foreign policy towards Great Britain during the Jeffersonian era.

CHAPTER FOUR:  
“TO TAKE FROM FAMILIES THEIR STAFF OF SUPPORT:”  
THE DOMESTIC AND CULTURAL REPURCUSSIONS OF IMPRESSMENT

Ann Chute and her child were forlorn in Salem, Massachusetts. Ann’s husband, David, had put to sea in 1812 and fell victim to a Royal Navy press gang. When Ann learned of her husband’s captivity she took the necessary steps to secure his release. Ann also wrote a letter to her husband, and though she was concerned about David’s situation, Ann seemed to be making the best of her situation.

I am well and the child also and I should be very glad if you would come home as soon as you can I was very uneasy about you I took the letter to custom house as soon as I got it and the gentleman did his best for to get you clear I have got a room on the alley . . . I live there by myself and have nobody for to quarrel with but myself I should have sent you some money but the gentleman told me you would not got it and so you must not think hard of it.<sup>1</sup>

Ann and the Chute child were surviving, but a deeper reading of the letter also reveals that she was struggling. Ann had clearly been anxious over David’s prolonged absence. Without David’s wages, Ann could not afford to stay in her previous dwelling and had been forced into a single-room abode. Finally, Ann seemed to have no support in Salem. While the Chutes had managed in David’s absence, the longer he was held captive, the less certain became Ann and her child’s future.

The prolonged absence via impressment of wage-earning seamen from their households could have a devastating impact on those left at home. All earned income was vital to survival in the household economy of the “lower sort.” The first part of this chapter explores some of impressment’s ripple effect consequences in the United States; specifically, poor relief and child mortality in seafaring neighborhoods. While historians

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Chute to David Chute, 4 July 1813, letter, David Chute file; Records of Impressed Seamen, 1793-1815; Records of the Department of States, Record Grouping 59, Entry 928; National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, Maryland.

have paid lip service to the toll impressment exacted on seamen's families, there has been little research done on the true cost.<sup>2</sup>

The chapter's second part moves to an exploration of how the American public was edified on the realities and repercussions of impressment. The majority of Americans did not live in port cities or towns. Even the majority of the urban population was not directly impacted by seaman abductions. Despite the fact that only a minority of Americans were ever exposed to a British press gang, impressment was a topic about which the majority of the nation was well informed. Poems, songs, and plays repeatedly visited the theme of love blighted by the machinations of British press gangs. Historian Nicole Eustace argues that the dramatization of impressment for public consumption was largely political. The romanticizing of impressment played an important role in demonstrating the real suffering created by seaman abductions and exposing the wider American populace to those privations. Many Americans, both those dwelling in coastal towns but otherwise ignorant of the realities of life for the working poor and those living hundreds of miles from the coast, were exposed to impressment by these popular representations of the practice's harsh effect. Even more important were the newspaper reports on impressment. The *Aurora General Advertiser*, *National Intelligencer*, *Hudson Bee*, and *Richmond Gazette* championed a stronger national policy to halt impressment throughout the twenty year controversy. These were the means through which Americans learned about British manstealing, the conditions under which their fellow citizens suffered, and the price paid by impressment's most innocent victims.

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<sup>2</sup> Notable works on the repercussions of impressment in England include, Nicholas Rogers, *The Press Gang: Naval Impressment and its Opponents in Georgian Britain* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 37-58; J.R. Hutchinson, *The Press Gang Afloat and Ashore* (New York: Dodo, 1913) 170-86; for an attempt at the toll exacted in the United States see, Claire Phelan, "In the Vice of Empire: British Impressment of the American Sailor," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Texas Christian University, 2008), 153-74.

Approximately 30 percent of impressed American seamen identified themselves as husbands and fathers.<sup>3</sup> It was common for an impressed seaman to reference his wife and children when pleading for the United States government intervention. Abducted sailors explained that their incarceration at British hands was made worse by the fact that their dependents in America were going to suffer. William Burton was a native of Rock Hall, on Maryland's eastern shore. The British had forced him into service aboard HMS *Melampus* in November 1807. Burton was thoroughly distressed by August 1808, chiefly because he was long overdue to return home to his wife and three small children. Burton believed that his family was suffering in his absence and hoped "to return . . . at last to their long relief."<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Philadelphia tar Matthias Conkle, seized in port at Liverpool, explained in his appeal that, "having a wife and two children, my suffering and anxiety is great mostly on account of my loving family."<sup>5</sup>

Sailors were right to worry about their loved ones. Unintentionally deserted wives and children faced an uncertain future. The working poor of the early republic led a decidedly precarious existence. Families had to delicately balance their needs against their scant finances. Although seamen were considered unskilled laborers (and therefore toward the bottom of the earnings scale), their monthly wages still marked them as the

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<sup>3</sup> The information is a compilation of many records, including; Entry 928 letters of impressed seamen, Entry 929 Collector of Customs General Circular Instructions, Entry 930 Miscellaneous Lists and Papers Regarding Impressed Seamen, 1796-1818, Entry 931 Quarterly Abstracts of Application for the Release of Impressed Seamen, 1797 – 1801, Entry 932 Quarterly Returns of Impressed Seamen, 1805-1809, Entry 934 Letters from the Admiralty Office to Joshua Johnson, 1794-96, Entry 935 Index to Register of Applications for the Release of Impressed Seamen, 1797, Entry 936 Register of Applications for the Release of Impressed Seamen, 1792-1802, Misc., Rec., RG 59, NACP; Talbot Papers, G.W. Blunt-White Library; Message to Congress on Impressed Seamen, January 15, 1812. Hereafter these will be cited as Collected Records of Impressed Seamen when referenced together.

<sup>4</sup> Mr. Noble to Mr. McColough, 12 August 1808, letter, William Burton file, RG 59: 928.

<sup>5</sup> Mattias Conkle to James Madison, letter, Mattias Conkle file, RG 59: 928.

breadwinner. Women were expected to contribute to the family economy, and did so through the few avenues open to them; laundress, seamstress, huckster, and landlady. Women's wages, though necessary to maintaining the household and keeping the family from insolvency, were often supplementary.<sup>6</sup> The sudden and prolonged absence of the primary wage earner proved a staggering loss for many families.

Seamen's families occasionally communicated the hardship imposed by impressment to the Federal government during the appeals process. These letters constitute some of the most interesting evidence sent to the State Department on behalf of captive seamen. Hannah Conyers and her children had to survive on their own for nearly thirteen years after the British seized John Conyers. When word finally reached Hannah that her husband was alive and attempting to win his freedom, she penned him a heartfelt letter expressing her joy at his survival and the family's eagerness for his return. Hannah also mentioned to John the hardships she had to overcome during his absence: "It has been a very long while since I saw you . . . you may suppose it has been very difficult to provide sustenance for my self and family since you have been gone, but the sight of you ever more will sufficiently repay me for all the trouble I have had since you were here."<sup>7</sup>

Mary Ann Boyd found herself in financial straits during the impressment of her husband, Alexander. Luckily, Boyd seemed to have little trouble sending and receiving letters from his wife. He instructed her to withdraw money from a Mr. Hogthrope, who

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<sup>6</sup> Billy Smith, *The "Lower Sort:" Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 111-12, 118-19, 124. For more on the role of women in the economy of the early republic, and in port cities particularly, see Seth Rockman, *Scraping By: Wage Labor, Slavery, and Survival in Baltimore* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009); Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor, *The Ties That Buy: Women and Commerce in Revolutionary America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009); Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Hannah Conyers to John Conyers, 26 July 1811, letter, John Conyers file, RG 59: 928.

seemed to function as both a landlord and a banker for the Boyds. Unfortunately, Hogthrope was less than honest, and upon learning of Alexander Boyd's impressment, Hogthrope apparently evicted Mary Ann and refused to settle the family account. (According to Boyd, Hogthrope was holding at least fifty dollars for the family – a substantial sum for a seaman.) Mary Ann was able to rely on the kindness of a neighbor and was spared the worst hardship.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, MaryAnn Watson faced an uncertain future after her husband, William, was forced into the Royal Navy. Shortly after learning of William's captivity, their boarder, Daniel Star, was killed. Then, approximately nine months after William's departure, tragedy struck the Watson home again. MaryAnn explained to her husband, "I have seen More Trouble the first 9 Months after you Left Me than ever I did before. . . . I was delivered with A Dead child which I believe was through Trouble concerning you. . . . I am doing as well as I can in My Desolate Situation."<sup>9</sup> MaryAnn Watson credited her survival to her mother, who took in MaryAnn and cared for her.

A support network often proved key to enduring tough times. Rozanna Gardner, for instance had relocated with her husband, John, from Philadelphia to Easton, Maryland. After a press gang seized John in the West Indies, Rosanna found herself alone – a stranger in a strange town. Without any source of support in Easton, Rozanna turned to her former Philadelphia employer for help. Rozanna had worked for Rubens Peale at the Peale Museum and must have been a well-liked employee. Peale sustained Rozanna during her husband's absence, and helped her gather all the necessary paperwork to

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<sup>8</sup> Alexander Boyd to Mary Ann Boyd, 30 December 1808, Alexander Boyd file, RG 59: 928.

<sup>9</sup> MaryAnn Watson to William Watson, 28 October 1811, William Watson file, RG 59: 928.

process John's appeal.<sup>10</sup>

Abducted seamen evinced awareness of the importance of friends and relatives in aiding their loved one's survival. That is undoubtedly why Adam Freeman, shackled aboard a British man of war, implored his brother Solomon to protect his family: "My Dear little son Do take care of him and my wife."<sup>11</sup> The necessity of outside aid also motivated Thomas Tebbs to propose a national relief fund for the families of impressed seamen. Tebbs unwillingly served the British for three years and knew first-hand the difficulties that his wife and children were forced to overcome. Upon Tebbs' release, he returned to the United States and launched an advocacy campaign. "I will leave it to your imagination to describe the distress of a wife and infant . . . who have been deprived of a Father and Husband on whose earnings rested their only dependence for subsistence," Tebbs wrote in his petitions to President Madison, James Monroe, and the House of Representatives. He recommended the US government provide a stipend to the families of captive Americans and look to the British government for compensation.<sup>12</sup> Although no national fund was ever established, such a scheme was an important part of Maryland congressman Samuel Smith's proposed anti-impressment legislation.

Of course, not every destitute family had a support network on which they could rely. Often times, seamen and their families were not native residents of their cities, but had moved to New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, or Norfolk to pursue better employment opportunities. When a Baltimore seaman was pressed into British service,

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<sup>10</sup> John Gardner file, RG 59: 928.

<sup>11</sup> Adam Freeman to Solomon Freeman, 16 May 1812, Adam Freeman file, RG 59: 928.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Tebbs to James Monroe, 2 May 1809, Thomas Tebbs file, RG 59: 928.

the abandoned family may not have a ready network of family and friends on whom to fall back. While a few lucky women, like aforementioned Rozanna Gardner, might have a kind-hearted, distant benefactor willing to help shoulder the burden, that was the exception, not the rule. Some sort of informal neighborhood support system might exist, as outlined by Ellen Hartigan-O'Connor in her work on women and the market economy, but such networks were not designed for prolonged relief.<sup>13</sup> The working poor teetered too precariously on the line between sufficiency and destitution to offer more than token aid to a friend in need. Women left with the duty of sustaining the household were often forced to rely on more formal charity to make ends meet.

Poor relief came in various forms for the women and children of seafaring communities. Home assistance, or outdoor relief, was probably the least disruptive. It allowed families to remain in their residence while city or town officials made necessities available for them to bring home.<sup>14</sup> In Philadelphia, for example, the city council collected and distributed firewood among the indigent during the winter.<sup>15</sup> Some families could rely on church alms. Much like outdoor relief, church assistance allowed the recipient to remain in their homes. Outdoor relief could not be counted on to provide indefinite assistance. In general, outdoor relief was designed to maintain a family for three months, six months at the most. Billy G. Smith, historian of the urban poor in early America, noted that the lower sort's "material position was extremely vulnerable, and

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<sup>13</sup> Hatigan-O'Connor, *Ties that Buy*, 1-12, 59-68.

<sup>14</sup> For more on outdoor relief see, Priscilla Ferguson Clement, *Welfare and the Poor in the Nineteenth-Century City: Philadelphia, 1800-1854* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1985), 67-81, 142-45.

<sup>15</sup> "Philadelphia Society Collecting Wood Donations," *Aurora General Advertiser*, 8 January 1812.

were easily driven below the subsistence level by ordinary circumstances such as business cycles, seasonal unemployment, illness, injury, pregnancy or child-care requirements, and epidemics that disrupted the city's economy."<sup>16</sup> Imagine the havoc wreaked by impressment. Families unable to sustain themselves often sought refuge in the almshouse.<sup>17</sup>

Almshouses suffered from a poor reputation in the United States. For example, the Blockley Almshouse in Philadelphia was known for pervasive corruption among the staff. Nurses routinely stole medicine and other goods, which they sold to supplement their income. In February 1806, an expose in the Philadelphia newspaper, *Freeman's Journal*, revealed that supervisors at Blockley were guilty of "pilfering clothing, provisions, etc., and the introduction of spirituous liquors, with the consequence of drunkenness, elopement, and fornication."<sup>18</sup> In addition, Blockley historian Charles Lawrence concluded that the almshouse doctors tended toward gross incompetence and that "patients in the hospital had been murdered through neglect, or worse."<sup>19</sup> Boston's Almshouse was considered no better. The overcrowded and rundown facility had been built in the 1660s and created an unhealthy environment for the inmates. Josiah Quincy, a prominent Massachusetts politician, lamented about the conditions there: "Persons of every age and character were lodged under the same roof; the sick disturbed by the noise

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<sup>16</sup> Smith, *The "Lower-Sort,"* 124.

<sup>17</sup> For more on women, families, and almshouse see, Ruth Wallis Herndon, "Poor Women and the Boston Almshouse in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic*, 32 (Fall 2012), 349 – 381; Monique Bourque, "Women and Work in the Philadelphia Almshouse, 1790-1840," *JER*, 32 (Fall 2012), 383 – 413.

<sup>18</sup> "Defector," *Freeman's Journal*, 6 February 1806.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Lawrence, *History of the Philadelphia Almshouse and Hospitals* (Philadelphia: Published by Author, 1905), 48-49, 56.

of the healthy and the aged and infirm endangered by the disease and noise of the profligate.”<sup>20</sup> At the turn of the eighteenth century, the Boston Almshouse suffered a twenty percent mortality rate among its residents – hardly a ringing endorsement for those seeking aid.<sup>21</sup> Understandably, the urban poor viewed almshouses as their last resort.

Historian Robert Cray has demonstrated the continual swelling of the population experienced by the New York Almshouse during the two decades of the impressment crisis. The amount of money allocated by the city’s Common Council to poor relief more than doubled in the first decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>22</sup> The various superintendents of the New York Almshouse continually fretted over the pull between of supply and demand. In 1806, Superintendent Phillip Arcularius worried, “applications for admissions have lately multiplied to such a degree that should the influx continue, or increase, the Superintendent apprehends, there will not be room to accommodate all, who may yet apply for Admission into the Alms House.”<sup>23</sup> A month later, Arcularius reported that more than one hundred families were being maintained by the almshouse.<sup>24</sup> In 1808, new Superintendent William Mooney lamented to the Common Council about the ever increasing number of children being abandoned at the Almshouse. The same year

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<sup>20</sup> Josiah Quincy, *Report of the Committee to Whom was Referred . . . the Consideration of the Pauper Laws of this Commonwealth* (Boston: 1821), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Ruth Wallis Herndon and Amilcar E. Challu, “Mapping the Boston Poor: Inmates of the Boston Almshouse, 1795-1801,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 44 (Summer 2013), 70.

<sup>22</sup> Robert E. Cray, *Paupers and Poor Relief in New York and Its Rural Environs, 1700-1830* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988), 117-19.

<sup>23</sup> Phillip Arcularius to Common Council, 15 December 1806, Common Council Records; New York City Municipal Archives, New York, NY.

<sup>24</sup> Arcularius to Common Council, 12 January 1807, Common Council Records; New York City Municipal Archives.

Mooney reported that the resident population had surpassed one thousand for the first time.<sup>25</sup> It never fell below one thousand again. Cray attributes the bloated Almshouse residency to a number of factors – Jefferson’s embargo, Irish immigration, and the general displacement caused by urban growth. Undoubtedly, each of those factors played an important role, but the significance of impressment should not be underestimated.

New York City was the epicenter of American shipping, and as demonstrated earlier, the largest number of impressed seamen identified the city as their home. The British seized an estimated 3,000 New York sailors over twenty years, which means approximately 900 families were suddenly deprived of the chief wage earner for an indeterminate amount of time. According to the Almshouse ledger, one hundred and twenty families without an adult male accompanying them turned to the Almshouse for shelter and aid between 1789 and 1813. The records of the New York Almshouse cannot be taken at face value. While a secretary kept a ledger of the comings and goings of almshouse residents, the book is inconsistent, with only occasional entries recorded between 1789 and 1809. Based on the census reports submitted to the Common Council, it appears more people resided at the almshouse than show up in the ledger. Accurate record keeping did not begin until 1810. Even so, valuable information can be gleaned from the almshouse log book.<sup>26</sup> The majority of the aforementioned one hundred and twenty families entered the almshouse between 1810 and 1812. This reflects the state of the almshouse records, however, and does not prove those years were harsher on the working poor. As noted previously, more than one hundred families relied on the poor

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<sup>25</sup> William Mooney to Common Council, 14 November 1808, Common Council Records; New York City Municipal Archives.

<sup>26</sup> Almshouse Ledger, 1789-1813, Almshouse Collection; New York City Municipal Archives.

house for survival in 1807, but the secretary only recorded the Connelly family in the ledger. It was not uncommon for mothers and children to enter an almshouse without their husbands and fathers; the male head of the household pursued employment outside the poor house, while his family sought relief on the inside.<sup>27</sup> Examining the specific one hundred and twenty families, however, reveals that their cases were not common. Half of all the families reliant on the Almshouse between 1810 and 1812 can trace their financial hardship back to impressment. In the preceding years, when impressment was more widespread, families must have sought relief from the almshouse at an equivalent rate. Reflecting the information back on the years prior to 1810, it is likely that the overcrowding and strained resources of the New York Almshouse emanated, in part, from impressment.<sup>28</sup>

Almshouses were never healthy environments – Boston’s high inmate mortality rate as much. The New York Almshouse, with living space and stores stretched to the limited, was no exception. Two cases of mothers forced to seek shelter in that facility with their children demonstrate the fatal possibilities of refuge.

Margaret Parsons was married to New York seaman William Parsons. By the summer of 1811, the Parsons had two children – William and Susan Ann – and a baby on the way. William found employment on the merchant brig *Sally* for a voyage to the West Indies. It is likely that William had made the same voyage many times, it was a common shipping route. William did not return from this particular voyage, however. On the

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<sup>27</sup> Herndon, “Poor Women,” 351-55.

<sup>28</sup> Almshouse Ledger, 1789-1813; Collected Records of Impressed Seamen.

return trip, a press crew boarded the *Sally* and forced William into the Royal Navy.<sup>29</sup>

Margaret Parsons made a strong attempt at remaining independent during her husband's absence. She must have done something to earn an income. Maybe she took in a boarder or maybe she sewed slop – perhaps both. Unlike many poor women, Margaret did not deliver her baby in the almshouse. The Parsons baby, a girl named Adeline, was born in March. In the wake of Adeline's birth, however, Margaret grew ill. Whatever Margaret had done during the last six months to keep her family independent, her efforts were undone by a spring fever. On 13 April 1812, Margaret Parsons and her three children entered the almshouse. The secretary noted the reason for Margaret's admission as "sick." The three children were all healthy. That changed.

Six-year-old William Parsons fell ill. Whether he suffered from the same ailment as his mother, or another malady working its way through the Almshouse population remained unclear. Either way, William was ravaged by his illness and on 23 April 1812, ten days after entering the facility as a healthy boy, he died. Eight days later, 1 May 1812, seven-week-old Adeline Parsons perished, as well. By the end of May 1812, Margaret and Susan Ann were discharged from the Almshouse – their life in ruins. William Parsons remained trapped in the British navy, and two of the three Parsons children lay buried in the Almshouse cemetery.<sup>30</sup>

Eliza Mott and her son Charlie fared even worse than Margaret Parsons. Eliza was a young woman, only twenty-two years old in 1812, and the mother of a two-year-old. In the fall of 1810, Eliza's husband John went to sea and never returned. The

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<sup>29</sup> Collected Records of Impressed Seamen.

<sup>30</sup> Almshouse Ledger, 1789-1813.

British pressed him into service aboard a man of war. Eliza was a New York native and may have had family that helped support her for a time during John's absence.<sup>31</sup> She managed to avoid the almshouse for well over a year. In February 1812, however, something in Eliza's circumstances changed. She and Charlie Mott entered the New York Almshouse on 4 February 1812. Both mother and child were healthy, so their reason for turning to public assistance must have been financial.

The Motts were Almshouse residents for nearly two months when Charlie grew ill at the end of March. Although the New York Almshouse also functioned as a hospital, Charlie's sickness quickly progressed beyond a physician's care. He died on 2 April 1812. Eliza likewise fell sick. Not many young, healthy adults perished at the Almshouse. The most vulnerable were the very young and the very old. Eliza Mott was an exception. Perhaps the loss of Charlie drained her will to live. Eliza was laid to rest on 13 April 1812, eleven days after her toddler son.<sup>32</sup>

The tragedies that unfolded in the New York Almshouse were not necessarily the common result of an impressed husband or father. Some families turned to the almshouse for aid and successfully navigated their way back to subsistence. The losses suffered by the Parsons and the Mott families were not uncommon, either. Impressment often forced families to pay a heavy toll. In the seafaring neighborhood of Philadelphia known as Southwark, there was a marked increase in child mortality during the years of the impressment controversy. In particular, Southwark witnessed a steady increase in the number of children's deaths caused by parasitic worms. Between 1805 and 1807, worms

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<sup>31</sup> Collected Records of Impressed Seamen.

<sup>32</sup> Almshouse Ledger, 1789-1813.

accounted for at least a fifth of all deaths among neighborhood children aged twelve and younger.

Intestinal worms are generally classified into two groups, roundworms and flatworms. In the United States there are three prevalent types of parasitic worms; the hookworm, the common roundworm, and the tapeworm. Hookworm infestations are caused by the direct contact of the skin, usually the soles of the feet, with the infectious worm larvae. The larvae migrate to the stomach where they latch onto the walls of the small intestine with their hook-like teeth. They average a half inch in length, infest in multitudes, and pass their eggs through the host feces. Roundworms are contracted through direct ingestion of their eggs by the host. Lodged loosely in the small intestines, they can grow to fifteen inches in length, are as thick as the average earthworm, eventually migrate to the host's lungs, and distribute their eggs through feces. The tapeworm is similar to the roundworm in its manner of infection and egg distribution, but can also be contracted from the consumption of undercooked meat and other foods. The tapeworm is measured in yards, not inches, and also targets the small intestines. Although easily treated today, each of these worms was deadly in its own right during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Worms deny the host body its nutrients causing anemia, weight loss, seizures in the case of the tapeworm, abdominal pain, severe vomiting, either a loss or increase in appetite, and diarrhea; all fatal conditions before the advent of modern medicine.<sup>33</sup>

By 1772, there was a basic understanding of parasitic worms found in a temperate

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas C. Jefferson and Tracy Irons-Georges, ed. *Children's Health*, 2 vols. (Pasadena, CA: Salem Press, Inc., 1999), 2: 802-05; Thomas W.M. Cameron, *Parasites and Parasitism* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1956), 137-140, 226-28; D.B. Blacklock and T. Southwell, *A Guide to Human Parasitology for Medical Practitioners* (Baltimore, MD: William Wood and Co., 1935), 91-103.

climate, as illustrated by William Buchan's book *Domestic Medicine*, in which Buchan correctly identified the three basic types.<sup>34</sup> While Buchan recognized the kinds of worms found in Europe and North American, he did not understand how the parasites were spread: "There seems to be a hereditary disposition in some persons to this disease. I have often seen all the children of a family subject to worms of a particular kind. They seem frequently to be owing to the nurse."<sup>35</sup> Worm infections did affect multiple children in the same American seafaring families. In 1805, John and Eleanore Potts lost both of their sons to the disease; four-year-old James in May and tenth-month-old John two months later. Also in that year, siblings Sarah and David Paul succumbed to the parasites.<sup>36</sup> Neither heredity nor breastfeeding, however, caused these deaths. Parasitic worms were, and are, a communal parasite.

The eggs of infectious worms thrive in warm, moist conditions. Specifically, worm eggs and larvae survive best in temperatures between seventy-five to eighty-five degrees Fahrenheit. Regular rainfall, moist soil, and high humidity combined with ideal temperatures allow worm eggs and larvae to live up to one hundred days after being expelled by the host. Since the eggs are passed through feces, sanitary conditions in large part determine how widespread worm infestations may become. Ecologist Lawrence R. Penner, in his research on worms, emphasized that point: "Even a small amount of

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<sup>34</sup> William Buchan, *Domestic Medicine* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985; reprint, London: 1772), 464.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 465

<sup>36</sup> Nicholas Collin, Burial Records, Gloria Dei Church, 1793-1831, transcription of the original, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, 369-370, 374, 380, 390.

pollution may mean a maximum potential infection.”<sup>37</sup> Environmental and demographic conditions in Southwark were ideal for pervasive worm contamination.

Southwark was located approximately one mile south of Independence Hall and rested along the banks of the Delaware River. Before development, the land was mostly swamps and marshes. Southwark’s proximity to the river inevitably led to widespread flooding in the spring and fall. Except in cases of severe drought, the soil of Southwark never dried out.<sup>38</sup> Pennsylvania’s weather conditions met the ideal temperature and rainfall requirements for worms to flourish. Located in a temperate climate, the average temperature in Philadelphia from May to September was seventy-eight degrees, with an average rainfall of four inches per month.<sup>39</sup>

Southwark attracted a predominately lower-sort population of sailors, laborers, and artisans associated with shipbuilding. Although the city of Philadelphia began overhauling its sewer system and public water supply after the yellow fever epidemic of 1793, those civic improvements were reserved for the neighborhoods of more affluent Philadelphians. The laboring poor of Southwark were near the bottom of Philadelphia’s social and economic hierarchy.<sup>40</sup> In Southwark, garbage, animal and human waste, and occasionally the rotting carcasses of dogs and horses, were dumped in the streets.<sup>41</sup> The

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<sup>37</sup> Lawrence R. Penner, “Effects of Temperature and Moisture on the Distribution and Incidence of Certain Parasites,” *Ecology* 22 (Oct. 1941): 441.

<sup>38</sup> Simon P. Newman, *Embodied History: The Lives of the Poor in Early Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 126-27.

<sup>39</sup> Jon Nese and Glen Schwartz, *The Philadelphia Area Weatherbook* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002), 39-47.

<sup>40</sup> Smith, *The “Lower Sort,”* 6.

<sup>41</sup> Newman, *Embodied History*, 126.

general filthiness of Southwark, combined with its location in the Delaware River's flood plain and Pennsylvania's temperate climate, ensured a sustained period of incubation for worm eggs stretching from May to September each year.

The records of Reverend Nicholas Collin, minister of Gloria Dei Episcopal Church in Southwark, disclose valuable information about the prevalence of worms. Collin was a member of the American Philosophical Society, which explains in large part why he kept much more detailed death records than the other ministers of Philadelphia. Whereas most other burial records from the early Republic merely communicate the name and age of the deceased, Collin documented the name, age, and date of passing for everybody buried in Gloria Dei's cemetery.<sup>42</sup> The majority of the time, Collin also left intricate details about the cause of death. For example, when Thomas Shillingford died in 1802, Collin wrote the following entry in the Gloria Dei records:

This child died of worms as so many others do. Their abundance was singular; he having voided in the course of a week above one hundred, and at once of the 21<sup>st</sup> of this month, 45. The mother told me they were all from ¼ to 1/8 of a yard long, and that in the beginning of the disorder, 14 of them were vomited. The kind was the usual white. He had been sick a month.<sup>43</sup>

Collin often went into great detail about the worms. His records indicate that the most common parasite was the roundworm. He seemed particularly interested in their length. Jemina Toland "pewked [sic] several worms, somewhat colored, 10 inches long." When Mary Lind voided her worms, Collin recorded, "some 9 inches, the smallest 4 or 5. All of the usual white kind." He took similar note was taken of William Malander's

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<sup>42</sup> Burial Records, Gloria Dei; for an example of more common church records see; Baptism, Marriages, and Burials, Christ Church, 1792-1826, HSP; Burial Records, Holy Trinity Roman Catholic Church, 1790-1835, HSP.

<sup>43</sup> Burial Records, Gloria Dei, 118.

worms, “10 or 12 worms came from him down, some at least 9 inches long, none less than four.”<sup>44</sup> The common roundworm, as noted earlier, can grow as long as fifteen

inches, average about nine inches, and range in color from white to pale yellow.

Roundworms also tend to infest the host body in bunches, and Collin’s entries note the abundance of worms, from the massive amount discharged by Thomas Shillingford to

Elizabeth Little, who vomited “a heap, equal to the crown of a hat.” Finally, Collin

referred to the roundworms that claimed the life of Henry Hoover as “the usual kind.”<sup>45</sup>

Hookworms and tapeworms still infected Southwark children. The numerous references

that Collin made to what were obviously roundworms, however, testify to the

commonness of that parasite.

Collin did not fully appreciate the level of suffering endured by these children, but

he knew the character of worms. Because the parasites flourish on the nutrients ingested

by the host, the growing infestation progressively denies the host the necessary

nourishment. Mary Lemlin was only twenty-months old when she died and Collin

described her as “reduced to a skeleton by worms.” Dying from worms was a prolonged

process, with some children suffering stomach pains for as long as a year. Mary Hewes

was a year and a half when worms finally claimed her life. Collin noted that Mary was

“always weakly,” signaling that her struggle with worms was prolonged.<sup>46</sup>

Many children involuntarily found their bodies trying to rid themselves of

parasites as infestations became more serious. Both James and John Potts tried to vomit

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 216-218, 231.

<sup>45</sup> Burial Records, Gloria Dei, 123, 220.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 354; Jefferson, *Children’s Health*, 2: 802-805.

their worms. In James' case, Collin reported that "some were choaking [*sic*] of him, tho' not getting up." John faced similar complications: "They some times got up to his throat" but failed to exit his body. Mary Anne Josephine Petty "had been gagging...for 2 weeks" on worms before surrendering to the parasites.<sup>47</sup> Children literally choked to death on intestinal worms.

All children were susceptible to worms, for that matter most adults of the period probably served as a host at one time or another, but it was particularly deadly to those under the age of five. The average age of Southwark children who yielded to the disease was three years, four months old. This certainly did not exclude infants or older children from the illness. The youngest fatality was seven-month-old James Williams, the eldest, fourteen-year-old Mary Anne Carns. Nevertheless, it was toddlers, age two through five, who were most likely to die from worms.<sup>48</sup>

There are a number of different reasons to account for the deadliness of parasitic worms in toddlers. By the age of one, most mothers stop breastfeeding and wean their infants to solid foods.<sup>49</sup> Dirty hands and unwashed fruits and vegetables could transfer fecal matter containing worm eggs to young children. Additionally, while tapeworms spread their eggs through feces, the parasite can also be contracted through undercooked meat products. Thus a piece of undercooked beef or pork could lead to the condition. Pork was the most common meat consumed among the lower sort of Philadelphia, but

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<sup>47</sup> Burial Records, Gloria Dei, 374, 383.

<sup>48</sup> Burial Records, Gloria Dei.

<sup>49</sup> Susan E. Klepp, "Malthusian Miseries and the Working Poor in Philadelphia, 1780-1830: Gender and Infant Mortality," in *Down and Out in Early America*, ed. Billy G. Smith (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004), 84-85.

grain products constitute the mainstay of laboring Philadelphia families. This afforded little relief, however, as dwarf tapeworm was commonly transferred through grains and cereals before modern food preparation practices.<sup>50</sup>

Babies crawl by the age of one, most start walking by fifteen months, and nearly all are mobile by eighteen months.<sup>51</sup> Ambulatory toddlers living in Southwark unwittingly placed themselves in a situation ideal for worm infestations. Hookworms spread through their eggs and larvae coming in direct contact with the host's skin, usually the feet. Toddlers walking barefoot inside sullied homes or outside in the dirt alleyways of Southwark (where fecal matter containing hookworm spawn abounded) fell victim. As toddlers grew older, they began to seek amusement further away from the home. The streets of Philadelphia became a common recreation destination.<sup>52</sup> The horrid sanitation conditions of Southwark provided ideal conditions for the spread of worms. Children at play fall on the ground, they wrestle, and some simply enjoy rooting around in the dirt. For urban children in the early nineteenth century, however, such amusements posed unseen dangers. Dirt on the hands often meant feces on the hands. Among the common habits of children is sucking their fingers and chewing their nails; toddlers in the early republic were no different. An innocent game could easily lead to a deadly case of parasitic worms.

The environment of Southwark was always a perfect breeding ground for parasitic

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<sup>50</sup> Smith, *The "Lower Sort,"* 97-99; Jefferson, *Children's Health*, 2: 803-804.

<sup>51</sup> Benjamin Spock, *Dr. Spock's Baby and Childcare*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Pocket Books, 1998), 110-112.

<sup>52</sup> Simon P. Newman, "Dead Bodies: Poverty and Death in Early National Philadelphia," in *Down and Out*, 58-59.

worms. The habits of toddlers, likewise, were unchanging. All the necessary conditions for an outbreak of parasitic worms were present in Southwork for decades. What accounts for the dramatic rise in worm related deaths from 1805 to 1807?

The same years that witnessed the worst worm infestation in Southwork coincided with a spike in impressment. Of the approximately 2,300 captive Philadelphian seamen, close to 700, slightly less than a third, were taken by the Royal Navy between 1805 and 1807.<sup>53</sup> Since Southwark was home to most of Philadelphia's sailors, it is safe to assume that the majority of the 700 came from that neighborhood. Seven hundred men snatched away from a community during a three-year span must have taken an incredible toll on Southwark, both socially and economically. The absence of these men also contributed to the spread of communal parasites.

The wives of impressed men had to become the main providers for their families. Women's time and attention was focused more on wage-earning, and domestic obligations suffered. Children were left to their own devices for longer periods of time. Food preparation was rushed. It grew increasingly difficult for working mothers to keep their lodgings clean. Deteriorating sanitary conditions in the home resulted in increased cases of worms. Tight family budgets made mothers hesitant to spend money on doctors or medicines until it was too late. The more effective, less harmful treatments for worms, such as Peruvian bark and caraway seed oil were expensive. It was easy for mothers to overlook their toddler's stomach pains or the wheezing in their lungs (early signs of parasitic worms.) The more affordable treatments for worms were often poisonous purgatives that did as much harm to the children as good.

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<sup>53</sup> Collected Records of Impressed Seamen.

Impressment of American sailors by the Royal Navy created a multitude of single parent homes where mothers had to concentrate on earning money, in turn ignoring household chores and allowing more independence for their toddlers than they might have otherwise. Because worms are a communal disease, the children affected were not even necessarily those of impressed seamen. One child with parasitic worms could easily spread the infestation to a dozen other children. Dirty houses, dirty children, and dirty food were all capable of spreading worm eggs, and financial constraints prohibited mothers from treating the illness in its early stages, sealing the fate of many children.

New London, Connecticut, provides further evidence that children were often the most innocent victims of impressment. As established in the first chapter, New London suffered the largest proportionate loss of its male population to British men-of-war when compared to other American towns. More than fifteen percent of New London's adult males found themselves unwillingly sailing under the Union Jack. A study of New London's vital records reveals that there was a significant increase in the rate of child mortality during the twenty year span of the impressment controversy.

Between 1793 and 1812, eighty-eight children, between the ages of three months and twelve years old, died from a variety of causes. That is an average of 4.4 children every year, an increase of more than a child per year when measured against the prior two decades. Between 1773 and 1792 (a time of considerable turmoil in its own right) the child mortality rate in New London amounted to 3.35 per year. In the two decades following the impressment era, between 1813 and 1832, the mortality rate dropped

considerably to just 1.5 annually.<sup>54</sup>

The New London vital records did not routinely list the cause of death. No pattern that emerges in New London as clearly as parasitic worms in Southwark. Nevertheless, the deceased children's average age was two years and nine months old – close to the age of Southwark's young fatalities. The toddlers of New London, like those of Southwark, were most likely to suffer a premature death during the impressment controversy. Again, the increased mobility of toddlers, combined with their natural inquisitiveness and general filthiness, rendered them the perfect victims to accidents, or communal disease. The vital records of New London, when referenced against the database of impressed seamen, show the correlation between absentee father and deceased child on multiple occasions.

John Williams died just six days short of his first birthday. Although the boy's cause of death is unknown, it is clear that his father William was not in New London when he passed. William had been pressed aboard a British man-of-war and was desperately appealing to American officials to secure his release.

Charles Brown was two and a half. At that age, Charles, like most toddlers, probably showed rapid development; he could follow simple directions from his parents (when he chose), communicate his needs, and he demonstrated growing independence.

Charles did not live to see his third birthday. His father, also named Charles, was far

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<sup>54</sup> I chose the minimum age of three months because any deaths younger than that were likely due to residual problems from a birth complication. There are a significant number of newborn fatalities, but birthing was fraught with hazard in the nineteenth century – impressment was not needed to make delivery dangerous. Additionally, I chose the age of twelve as the older cut-off because self-sufficiency increases with age and it seems likely that a teenaged child would have been more a benefit than a burden to a household suffering from an absentee wage-earner. Jacquelyn Ladd Ricker, *The Ricker Compilation of Vital Records of Early Connecticut: Based on the Barbour Collection of Connecticut Town Vital Records and Other Statistical Sources* (Baltimore: Genological Society Co., 2006). CD-ROM.

from home, languishing aboard a British frigate on the other side of the Atlantic, when the boy breathed his last in February 1808.

Henry Dennis perished at the tender age of eighteen months. Henry's father, John, had never seen or held his son because the British seized him before his son was born, and release him after Henry had died.

There are more examples: William Clark was three when his life was extinguished. His father, Ebenezer, was a captive in the West Indies and probably did not learn of his son's fate for months or even years afterward. Six-year old Hannah Porter was the daughter of impressed seaman John Porter. Hannah, being older and more self-aware than the aforementioned children, likely yearned for her father's presence during her final days.<sup>55</sup>

Since the children's causes of death were not recorded, it is impossible to state with certainty that they may have lived had their fathers been in New London instead of serving in the Royal Navy. High child mortality rates were a grim reality in the early republic. The annual death rate increase during the impressment years, though, when compared to both the previous and subsequent two decades, indicates a prolonged external influence on the town's health. In New London, as in Southwark, the protracted absence of a significant portion of the male population resulted in a more lethal environment for children of the community. Many of these children died without the comfort of paternal affection. Conversely, the men were left with the knowledge that they had not been there cradle their dying child or to offer their wives any comfort or

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<sup>55</sup> Ricker; Collected Record of Impressed Seamen.

help through the grieving process.<sup>56</sup>

Impressment caused anguish. The tales of suffering and the patterns of loss detailed for New York, Philadelphia, and New London can almost certainly be found in Baltimore, Charleston or Salem. The life of the working poor during the early republic was hard, and men and women constantly struggled just to scrape by. Impressment made the fight for survival that much harder, and some, like Eliza Mott, found it more than they could bear. Often it was children who were overwhelmed and devoured by the harsh environment surrounding them.

The misery caused by impressment strongly resonated with Americans of all sorts. Citizens far removed from the dismal seafaring neighborhoods learned about impressment's repercussion largely through entertainment and newspapers. The heartache caused by impressment was regularly depicted in poems, songs, and plays. Literary representations of impressment smacked of romanticism, but they nevertheless reflected an aspect of reality. Newspaper editors tended to report on impressment with grim realism. Although they too often failed to fully gauge the impact of abductions, editors – who were disproportionately urban in this period – realized that impressment affected more people than just captive seamen. Regardless of the flaws in

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<sup>56</sup> In many cases, it was probably years before the men learned of the children's fate. The early republic is often viewed in the historiography as the period in which child rearing and parental love began to modernize. The literature has tended to focus on the households of the elite because, being educated, they left behind diaries, letters, and journals. The illiteracy of the working poor, however, hardly renders them less affectionate parents. Doubtless they felt the pain of child loss as deeply and sincerely as their societal betters. For more on the development and affections of the early republic family, see; Bernard Wishy, *The Child and the Early Republic: Dawn of Modern American Child Nurture* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1968), 3-78; Karin Calvert, *Children in the House: The Material Culture of Early Childhood, 1600-1900* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 55-94; Susan Klepp, *Revolutionary Conceptions: Women, Fertility, and Family Limitation in America, 1760-1820* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, on behalf of the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2009), 56-127.

contemporaneous portrayals of impressment, American print culture succeeded in edifying the public.

Popular cultural representations of impressment in the United States were rooted in the English tradition – much like impressment itself. British poets, playwrights and songsters had been using the press gang as an antagonistic foil for well over a century. It is likely that most Americans first learned of impressment through one of several traditional English songs. As impressment began to affect life in the early republic, some of those same English ballads became popular in the United States. A particularly popular ditty was “Sweet Poll of Plymouth:”

Sweet Poll of Plymouth was my dear,  
When forced from her to go,  
A down her cheek rain'd many tear,  
My heart was fraught with woe.  
Our anchor weigh'd, for sea we stood,  
The land we left behind;  
Her tears then swell'd the briny flood,  
My sighs increased the wind.  
We plow'd the deep, and now between,  
Us lay the ocean wide;  
For five long years I had not seen  
My sweet, my charming bride.  
That time I sail'd the world around,  
All for my true love's sake,  
But press'd as homeward we were bound,  
I thought my heart would break.  
The press gang bold I ask'd in vain,  
To let me go on shore,  
I long'd to see my Poll again,  
But saw my Poll no more.  
And have they torn my love away?  
And is he gone? she cried:  
My Poll, the sweetest flower of May!

Then languish'd, droop'd, and died.<sup>57</sup>

It is easy to see why this song resonated in America during the impressment controversy. Although “Sweet Poll” was an English ballad, there was nothing in the lyrics that linked Susan (Poll) and her lover to Britain. Plymouth could have been Plymouth, Massachusetts, or Plymouth, North Carolina, as easily as it was Plymouth, England. The tragedy that unfolds – a husband’s long absence, thanks in no small part to a press gang, resulting in a young bride dying from heart-break – could easily be envisioned as an American couple.

“Sweet Poll” was not the only English ballad that flourished after crossing the sea lanes. Two other tunes, in particular, were eagerly embraced by the American populace. “Fair Kate Loved a Tar” was strikingly similar to “Sweet Poll.” Kate and Ben Surf were young and in love, although not wed because Kate’s parents objected. Ben gets dragged into naval service and drowns when he falls into the ocean. When Kate learns of her beau’s fate, she dies of heartache.<sup>58</sup>

The other well-liked English transplant was “The Galley Slave.” The song appeared in at least two American popular song books, in an impressment narrative, in a two-song pamphlet in 1807 (along with “The Girl I Left Behind Me”), and also on broadsides.<sup>59</sup> The ballad is doubly interesting because it served as the centerpiece of a

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<sup>57</sup> “Sweet Poll of Plymouth,” broadside, Isaiah Thomas Collection, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

<sup>58</sup> *The Festival of Mirth, and American Tar’s Delight: A Fund of the Newest Humorous, Patriotic, Hunting, and Sea Songs* (New York: Thomas B. Jansen & Co., 1800), 43-44.

<sup>59</sup> “The Galley Slave,” broadside, Isaiah Thomas Collection, AAS; *The American Muse, or the Songster’s Companion* (New York: Smith & Forman, 1814), 35; *Joshua Davis, A Narrative of Joshua Davis, an American Citizen, Who Was Pressed and Served Aboard Six Ships of the British Navy* (Baltimore: B. Edes, 1811), 50; *The National Songbook: Being a Collection of Patriotic, Martial, and*

popular play: *The Purse; or, The Benevolent Tar*. In the United States the play was rewritten and retitled, *The Purse; or The American Sailor's Return*. Focusing on "The Galley Slave," once more the familiar theme of impressment as a love-crushing, soul-stealing practice emerges.<sup>60</sup>

Oh! Think on my fate, once I freedom enjoyed,  
Was as happy as happy could be;  
But pleasure is fled, even hope is destroyed,  
A captive alas, on the sea.  
I was taken by the foe, 'twas the fiat of fate,  
To tear me from her I adore;  
When thought brings to mind my once happy state,  
I sigh – I sigh as I tug at the oar.  
Hard, hard is my fate, oh how galling my chain,  
My life's steered by misery's chart,  
And though 'gainst my tyrant I scorn to complain,  
Tears gush forth to ease my sad heart:  
I disdain e'en to shrink, though I feel the sharp lash,  
Yet my heart bleeds for her I adore;  
While around me the merciless billows do dash,  
I sigh – I sigh and still tug at the oar.  
How fortune deceives, I had pleasure in tow,  
The port where she dwelt was in view,  
But the wish nuptial morn was o'erclouded with woe,  
I was hurried, dear Anna from you.  
Our Shallop was boarded and I torn away  
To behold my dear Anna no more:  
But despair wastes my spirits, my form feels decay;  
He sighed – he sighed and expired at the oar.<sup>61</sup>

English ballads may have found an eager audience in the United States, but

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*Naval Songs and Odes* (Trenton, NJ: James J. Wilson, 1813), 175; *The Girl I Left Behind Me and Other Popular Songs Including the Galley Slave* (Philadelphia: W. McCulloch Printing, 1806), 16.

<sup>60</sup> It should be noted that in the English version, it is not a British press gang, but Algerian pirates that enslave the titular galley slave.

<sup>61</sup> These specific lyrics come from, *The Girl I Left Behind Me*, 14.

American songsters were neither ignorant of the suffering caused by impressment, nor of impressment ballads' popularity. Many of the American entries into the genre followed the same pattern as their English counterparts. This is hardly surprising since these pieces were being written during the Romantic era. Among the hallmarks of Romanticism, and particularly prevalent during its early stages in the United States, were the embrace of intense feelings, the direct appeal of the author to the audience, and assertions of nationalism.<sup>62</sup> These elements can be found American popular songs referencing impressment. Numerous American ballads used captive seamen as their subject, but the focus here will be on "The Little Sailor Boy" (1798), "The Youthful Sailor" (1808), and "The Impressed American" (1811.)

"The Little Sailor Boy" was written by the nationally popular Susannah Rowson. She composed the ballad to be sung like a prayer from a young girl, Anna, on behalf of her beloved William. Anna wanted to ensure that her beau enjoyed protection all the dangers of the seas that he traveled. William was a special young man, the pride and joy of his parents and adored by everybody who knew him. The song specifies few of the actual hazards the little sailor boy faced, though it mentioned tempest in passing. The last verse, however, focused entirely on impressment.

May no rude foe his course impede,  
Conduct him safely o'er the waves,  
O may he never be compelled,  
To fight for power or mix with slaves.  
May smiling peace his steps attend,  
Each rising hour be crowned with joy,  
As blest as that when I again,  
Shall meet my much loved Sailor Boy.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> James Barbour and Thomas Quirk, eds., *Romanticism: Critical Essays in American Literature* (New York: Garland Press, 1986).

William was an innocent and the greatest risk he faced was not hurricanes or shipwrecks or disease or drowning, but impressment. “The Little Sailor Boy” stressed that the worst thing William could encounter was not death – at least death would preserve his purity – but to be stripped of his freedom and made a slave to a nation that lusted for power.

“The Youthful Sailor” also known as “The Impressment of An American Sailor Boy,” depicted the abduction of a seaman in more graphic terms. The song was written by John DeWolfe, a member of the wealthy Bristol, Rhode Island family. The ballad proved a favorite among American mariners. During the War of 1812, American prisoners aboard the British prison ship *Crown Prince*, sang the song as part of their Fourth of July celebration in 1813.

A promising young man went to sea and left behind loved ones moved to tears by his absence. A frigate abruptly interrupted his pleasant voyage. A press crew boarded the sailor’s ship and had eyes for the strong, bright-eyed young seaman. The ballad even dwells upon the uselessness of protections:

Nay, why that useless script unfold?-  
They damn the “lying Yankee scrawl,”  
Torn from thy hand, it strews the wave –  
They force thee trembling to the yawl.

The youthful sailor suffered harsh treatment in British hands. His captors whipped him and deprived him of sleep. He endured nothing but ridicule from both the frigates officers or his fellow seamen. Marginalized and without a single friend, the youthful sailor lost

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<sup>63</sup> *National Song Book*, 153.

hope and fell ill.

When sick at heart with hope deferred,  
Kind sleep his waiting form embraced,  
Some ready minion plied the lash,  
And the loved dream of freedom chased.  
Fast to an end his miseries drew,  
The deadly hectic flushed his cheek,  
On his brow the cold dew hung-  
He sighed and sunk upon the deck.

The hero was insulted further post-mortem. The British treated the hero's corpse contemptuously, refusing to shut his eyes and then dumping him overboard without the customary shroud.

The overwhelming sentiment of "The Youthful Sailor" was loss. Separation from friends and loved ones as the young sailor put out to sea; the loss of companionship and, more importantly, freedom with his seizure by a press crew; the loss of life as he succumbed to despair; the loss of dignity at his body's hasty disposal; and, finally, the loss of another young son of Columbia.<sup>64</sup>

Similar themes appeared in "The Impressed American" – physical abuse, lost liberty, English tyranny – the ballad also dwelt upon the question of seamen's families left behind. Nobody died of heartbreak in "The Impressed American." Instead the pressed man wondered about the fate of his wife and child. Unlike the previously discussed compositions, this one addressed the fact that impressment created widows and orphans.

With quick-beating heart, while constrained I toil,  
For my friends and my Country I mourn;  
And in retrospect trace all the scenes in the soil,

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<sup>64</sup> "The Impressment of An American Sailor Boy," broadside, 1814; Broadside Collection, New York Historical Society, New York, NY.

Where perhaps I shall never return.  
When I think on my Home, on my Wife, and my Child,  
That would cherub-like spring on my knee,  
My brain is on fire, my thoughts are as wild  
As the storm-enraged waves of the Sea.  
Away maddening thoughts and dark despair!  
There's a Providence ruling on high,  
Who the Widow and the Orphan takes under his care,  
And notes each oppressed man's sigh.<sup>65</sup>

There were other broadside ballads – “Jack Tar in Distress,” “An Appeal to Freemen,” “Patriotic Song, or Columbia Be Free,” to name a few – that reinforced the narrative of a free man suddenly robbed of his liberty and denied the comforts of home.<sup>66</sup> The consumption of these ballads was widespread considering the diverse places they appeared. Besides being printed in song books and distributed as broadsides, many of these songs were sung at theatres, usually during intermission, they were printed in newspapers across the country, and some were performed at Republican political gatherings.<sup>67</sup>

Historian Nicole Eustace recently analyzed the cultural significance of the impressment ballad. She concluded that the trope of a sailor and his lost love was a device used for the dual purpose of providing the United States with the moral high-ground and justifying a war waged for territorial expansion.<sup>68</sup> While many of the

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<sup>65</sup> *National Songbook*, 174.

<sup>66</sup> “The Sailor’s Landlady, or Jack Tar in Distress,” broadside, 1811, Isaiah Thomas Collection, AAS; “An American Patriot’s War Song, or An Appeal to Freemen, broadside, 1812, Isaiah Thomas Collection, AAS; *American Minerva*, 60-61.

<sup>67</sup> For example, “The Host That Fights for Liberty” was sung during intermission at Philadelphia’s New Theatre in March 1812, *Aurora General Advertiser*, 6 March 1812; at a meeting of the Charleston Marine Society, a prominent Republican association in South Carolina, they sang many of the referenced songs at their Washington Day celebration, “Marine Society,” *Charleston City Gazette*, 25 February 1812.

compositions are overly sentimental to the modern reader, it must be remembered that they were the product of the age. It is necessary to look beyond the over-romanticizing. It is also requisite to push past the politics of 1812. Many of these songs predated the push for war because by 1812 impressment was a two-decade long cancer. The ballads need to be read as representations of what was actually happening in ports across the eastern seaboard – a maudlin representation, but grounded in the truth, nonetheless. The importance of the ballads lies in the exposure that they provided to the American public.<sup>69</sup>

Other cultural representations of impressment lagged behind ballads. The American novel was just beginning to emerge at the turn of the century. None of the early American novelists used impressment as a plot device. It was in 1811, however, that the first impressment narrative saw print. *A Narrative of Joshua Davis, an American Who Was Pressed and Served Aboard Six Ships of the British Navy*, appeared in Baltimore the year before the United States' declaration of war. Davis's story was largely recounted in the previous chapter and will not be rehashed here. It is worth noting, however, that Davis's conclusion acknowledged the families American sailors left behind. "My friends, doubtless you are ever anxious to know the fate of your fathers, husbands, brothers, uncles, cousins, or sweethearts, when they have left you in order to get a living on the briny ocean, which is now ruled by the ships of his Britanic majesty."<sup>70</sup> He does not dwell on seamen's families, but in one quick sentence Davis

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<sup>68</sup> Nicole Eustis, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 77-79, 117.

<sup>69</sup> Paul Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 159-62.

<sup>70</sup> Davis, *A Narrative of Joshua Davis*, 75.

recognized that his fellow victims were exposed to impressment because they plied the ocean to support their families.

The theatre also embraced the pathos of impressment. In both the United States and Great Britain, theatres relied heavily on soldiers and sailors to fill the audience. Consequently, theatres consistently produced plays that addressed the issue of war and patriotism.<sup>71</sup> Unfortunately many of early nineteenth-century plays have not survived. In some cases, all that remains are titles or newspaper advertisements. Some scripts, however, were preserved. Usually scripts from the more popular productions came out in print, while less well received works were left to disappear. One frequently produced play was *The Purse; or The America Seaman's Return*.<sup>72</sup>

The plot of *The Purse*, revolved around a young orphan named Will. His father was lost at sea and his mother, Sally, was driven out of town without her son by Theodore – a devious accountant. Will found work as a page for a wealthy merchant, Mr. Baron, who was mourning the death of his son, Edmund. Meanwhile, Theodore tried desperately to find a way to cover up all the money he had pilfered from Baron. At this point, Will Steady and Edmund enter the story. The men had both been on the same ship – Will Steady as a seaman and Edmund as a passenger – and they became the sole survivors when their vessel wrecked. Their fortunes took an even worse turn when they were captured and pressed onto an English frigate. Will Steady sings about the fate of

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<sup>71</sup> Gillian Russell, *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics, and Society, 1793-1815* (Oxford, Eng: Clarendon Press, 1995), 16-19; David Waldstreicher, "Minstrelization and Nationhood: 'Backside Albany and the Wartime Origins of Blackface Minstrelsy,'" *William and Mary Quarterly*, forthcoming, 3-5, 7.

<sup>72</sup> The New Theatre, in Philadelphia, staged productions of *The Purse* in 1796, 1796, 1801, 1806, 1807, 1811, and 1812; Boston's Federal Street Theater in 1796, 1798; Salem (MA) Theatre in 1802; Savannah's Thalian Association in 1799; New York Theatre in 1803, 1805, 1806, 1810, and 1812; Charleston Thespis Society in 1803; Alexandria (VA) Theatre in 1810.

another American who served with them, “The Galley Slave.” Having finally returned home, Will intended to reunite with and son, Will. Will Steady and Edmund encounter young Will, sleeping on a stoop, and Will Steady, not recognizing his son and moved by his poverty, slips a purse full of money into the boy’s pocket before continuing to Baron’s house. Young Will awakes to find himself in possession of a fortune. Theodore learns of the boy’s new wealth and uses the coin purse to accuse Will of stealing from Baron, thereby hiding the accountant’s own misdoings. Baron believes Theodore’s lies and prepares to hand young Will over to the authorities when Will Steady, Sally, and Edmund all arrive. Theodore is exposed, the Steadys are reunited, as are the Barons, and presumably everybody lives happily ever after.<sup>73</sup>

The play clearly demonstrated that the Steadys struggled during Will’s absence; their poverty was an important plot element. Furthermore, Sally and young Will faced the brink of disaster. Sally was banished, forced to abandon her son, and unable to find employment. Young Will had essentially been orphaned and accused of a crime he was unable to defend himself against. The providential homecoming of Will Steady rescued his family from a tragic end. The message of the play was clear – the return of impressed American seamen will save their families from poverty or worse. It also left the audience to ponder the fate of wives and children of captive sailors who did not return and never would, like the seaman in “The Galley Slave.” Sometimes impressment figured more subtly in melodramas.

American playwright, William Ioor, employed impressment in various ways in *The Battle of Eutaw Springs*. The play provided commentary on the state of Anglo-

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<sup>73</sup> William Dunlap, *The Purse; or The American Seaman’s Return* (Philadelphia: 1806) rewritten and restaged from, J.T. Cross, *The Purse; or The Benevolent Tar: A Musical Entertainment in One Act* (London: 1794).

American relations and the superiority of American virtue. Ioor used the Revolutionary War battle (fought in South Carolina in 1781) as his backdrop. The plot revolved around a British soldier – Oliver Matthew Queerfish – who was a farmer in the English countryside before a press gang seized him for the Royal Navy. Queerfish volunteered for service as a soldier against the rebellious colonies to escape the harsh conditions aboard a man-of-war. He fought valiantly for his king, but developed an affinity for the American way of life. After the British Army’s defeat at Eutaw Springs, Queerfish chose to stay in South Carolina.<sup>74</sup>

Although Queerfish was an Englishman, his dramatized impressment could not help but stir American audiences. If the Royal Navy abducted and abused their own citizens, imagine the treatment that American seamen must be facing. Ioor, in order to drive the point home, had Major General Nathanael Greene rail against British tyranny. “Resolved to rule us with an iron rod! To make of Freedmen, Bondsmen! Slaves of Columbia’s Sons! . . . I say these British Ministers have compelled us to take up arms – to fight for Liberty!” An allegorical character, the feminine Genius of Liberty, watched over the entire drama, offering commentary on American superiority, such as: “America will become one day (nor is that day far distant) a great, free, powerful, and I hope, virtuous nation. More I’ll impart to thee, she will continue so, till the world’s end; in despite of all despots! If her sons be but united, and true to their own interests.”<sup>75</sup>

Ostensibly, Greene and the Genius of Liberty’s lines referenced the various Parliamentary acts that helped spur on the Revolution, but when *The Battle of Eutaw*

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<sup>74</sup> William Ioor, *The Battle of Eutaw Springs and the Evacuation of Charleston; or, The Glorious 14<sup>th</sup> of December 1782, A National Drama* (Charleston, SC: 1807).

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3, 26.

*Springs* was originally produced in 1807, the impressment of American seamen had attained its apex. Anglo-American relations were crumbling and the divisiveness of party politics had also reached a high point. The subtext of Ioor's play was immediately below the surface; impressment was an affront to American liberty and Federalist politics ran counter to what was best for the country.

Susannah Rowson's 1794 play, *Slaves in Algiers; or, A Struggle for Freedom*, went through waves of popularity. The work initially premiered at the height of the American struggle with the Barbary pirates, who were capturing American merchant vessels and holding the crews and passengers for ransom. *Slaves in Algiers* continued to resonate with American audiences because of the impressment controversy. (It helped that many Anglophobes were convinced the British supported and encouraged the Barbary pirates.)

The plot was a convoluted love story centered on the betrothed Henry and Olivia – who are both captives of the Dey, unbeknownst to each other. The story in *Slaves of Algiers* was not central to conveying Rowson's message. She concentrated on the struggle between freedom and tyranny and the tragedy of liberty obtained and then stolen away. As a secondary theme, Rowson harped on the heartbreaking consequences of captivity on families. Rebecca, Constant, Olivia and Frederic (mother, father, daughter, son, respectively) were once a happy family, but Algerian tyranny kept them apart for fourteen years. With dialogue such as, "To die in a struggle for freedom is better far than to live in ignominious bondage," and "May Freedom spread her benign influence through every nation, till the bright Eagle, united with the dove and the olive branch, waves high, the acknowledged standard of the world," it is easy to see why *Slaves of*

*Algiers* remained an audience favorite.<sup>76</sup>

Rowson penned at least two other scripts that focused on American seamen: *The American Tar* (1796), and *Hearts of Oak, or Old Scenes in the New World* (1810).

Unfortunately, not much remains of these other theatrical works. The latter play was a comedy set on a Pennsylvania farm. Seamen featured prominently in the story, and the production met with some acclaim in Boston and Philadelphia.<sup>77</sup> Less is known about *The American Tar*. The pattern established by Rowson's catalog of work, however, suggests that the plays most likely celebrated American liberty and virtue while condemning foreign tyranny. Judging the years in which each play premiered, it is safe to assume that the antagonists in *The American Tar* were Barbary pirates, but in *Hearts of Oak*, almost definitely British press gangs. Furthermore, *Hearts of Oak* took its title from the well-known march of the Royal Navy. The knowledge that the play centered on American sailors highlighted the irony of British tars singing that nobody was as "free as the sons of the waves."<sup>78</sup>

There are other plays, from other playwrights that have left titillating, but meager evidence of their subject matter. James Baker Nelson wrote and produced a play in 1808, *The Embargo or What News?* The show was written in support of Jefferson's embargo. Considering the immediate impetus for the embargo was impressment and the attack on the USS *Chesapeake*, it is likely that both events figured prominently in Nelson's play.

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<sup>76</sup> Susannah Rowson, *Slaves in Algiers; or, A Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia: 1794), 18, 72.

<sup>77</sup> "A New Production," *New England Palladium*, 4 December 1810; *Paulson's Daily Advertiser*, 11 December 1810.

<sup>78</sup> "Hearts of Oak," has the opening stanza; Come, cheer up, my lads, 'tis to glory we steer/ To add something more to this wonderful year;/ To honor we call you, as freemen not slaves/ For who are so free as the sons of the waves. *The New Naval Songbook* (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1865), 10.

*The Embargo* elicited a passionate response from the audience.<sup>79</sup> Some productions had such intriguing titles, like *The Press Gang, or the Harlequin Aeronaut* (a comedy), and *Preparations for Privateering, or American Tars* (a drama), that one is tempted to speculate about the works' content.<sup>80</sup>

The theatre was an important institution in the early republic, both culturally and politically. Unless someone lived in the larger American cities or towns, however, they likely did not have access to the theatre. Although the aforementioned plays served an important role in sensitizing urban audiences to the scourge of impressment, newspapers projected their reach much further than theatres. Consequently, the press became the most effective tool in communicating the impact of impressment to the American public.

Early nineteenth-century newspapers were highly partisan. During the first party system, newspapers either identified with the Federalists or the Republicans. The articles and editorials that the press carried directly reflected a particular editor's political leanings. Hundreds of small regional papers dotted the American landscape and the first US Congress enacted legislation that allowed for such proliferation. Other laws ensured that larger, urban newspapers were easily accessible to all Americans. Newspapers could be mailed at steeply discounted rates and printers could exchange newspapers amongst themselves for free.<sup>81</sup> By 1798, these policies helped to establish the importance of a few

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<sup>79</sup> James Barker Nelson to William Dunlap, letter, 10 June 1832, in William Dunlap, *The History of American Theatre* (New York: J&J Harper, 1832), 379.

<sup>80</sup> "The New Theatre," *Aurora General Advertiser*, 12 March 1812; *New York Daily Advertiser*, 5 December 1798.

key newspapers and their editors. Although the influence of different papers ebbed and flowed over the years, several newspapers stood out during the impressment crisis for their unflinching advocacy of victimized American seamen. The *Aurora General Advertiser*, *National Intelligencer*, *Richmond Gazette*, and *Hudson Bee* became the leading sources for news and opinions on the seizure of American seafarers.

The *Aurora General Advertiser* ranked as one of the most important newspapers of the early republic. The paper's preeminence derived from its Philadelphia location and the tacit support of many leading Republicans. Benjamin Bache, grandson of Benjamin Franklin, founded the paper in 1792. The *Aurora* was one of the nation's first openly political journals. Bache was a staunch Republican, an avid supporter of the French Revolution and cared nothing for the elitist, aristocratic views of the Federalists. Bache was not afraid to criticize George Washington, and loathed John Adams. He hammered Federalists on every issue, including impressment. It was not until Bache's assistant, William Duane, took over the *Aurora* that the paper became the leading advocate for the rights of American seamen.

William Duane came to Philadelphia by way of Ireland by way of upstate New York. Duane was American by birth, but when his father died in 1765, Duane's mother, Anastasia, returned to Ireland with her five-year-old son. Duane was raised in modest prosperity and received a well-rounded education as a young man. He and his mother had a falling out over his hasty marriage, and Duane had to choose a profession to support himself and his family. He chose printing, and moved to London. Duane

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<sup>81</sup> Jeffrey L. Pasley, "*The Tyranny of Printers*;" *Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville, VA: 2001), 1-24, 49-50.

gradually radicalized as an adult. The East India Company invited Duane to start a Calcutta newspaper in 1787. He found success in India, but negative editorials about the governance of the colony landed Duane in prison. He was also stripped of all the property he had acquired in Calcutta. Duane returned to England penniless, but with a newfound disgust for the autocratic nature of British government. In London, he became a vocal leader in working-class politics through his editorship of the *London Telegraph* and his membership in the London Corresponding Committee. Duane's incendiary rhetoric forced him to flee to the United States in 1796. William Duane languished in poverty for nearly two years before Benjamin Bache hired him as the *Aurora's* assistant editor in 1798. Shortly thereafter, Bache contracted yellow fever and died, but his will designated William Duane as the editor of the *Aurora General Advertiser*.<sup>82</sup> Historian Jeffery Pasley credits Duane's talent, above all else, for the *Aurora's* widespread influence. The "most important reasons for the *Aurora's* preeminence . . . were the powerful writing, political expertise, and editorial 'presence' of William Duane himself."<sup>83</sup> One of the myriad topics to which William Duane applied his talents was impressment.

During William Duane's editorship of the *Aurora General Advertiser*, the paper ran an item pertaining to impressment or seamen's rights, on average, every third day. During the fourteen years from when Duane assumed control of the paper until the

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<sup>82</sup> William Duane, *Biographical Memoir of William J. Duane* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen, & Hafflefinger, 1868), 1-6; Kim Tousley Phillips, *William Duane: Radical Journalist in the Age of Jefferson* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1989), 4-56.

<sup>83</sup> Pasley, 175.

declaration of war in 1812, he printed nearly two thousand items pertinent to the topic.<sup>84</sup> These pieces varied from coverage of Congressional debates to blurbs about the latest incidents. Duane's editorials on impressment, however, were the most compelling and popular items that the *Aurora* published on the subject.

William Duane viewed impressment as a capricious exercise of tyrannical power. When the Peace of Amiens crumbled in 1803 and impressment once more became a top priority in Anglo-American relations, the editor of the *Aurora* pounced with this strident declaration "A seaman in an American ship is to be presumed an *American* seaman. . . . *Proof* to the contrary ought to be possessed by the commander of any foreign ship before he should attempt to impress him." Duane concluded by warning his fellow citizens, "Arbitrary power has made impressment within the kingdom grow by precedent into common law, against the magna charta." If Americans did not actively resist impressment, he warned, they would eventually accept it just like their English cousins.<sup>85</sup>

When President Jefferson faced criticism for never presenting the Monroe-Pinkney Treaty to the Senate for approval (due largely to the absence of an impressment provision), Duane fully supported Jefferson's decision and reasoning. In particular, he emphasized the catastrophic consequences of impressment on seamen and their families.

Suppose a seamen with every prospect of peace before him, engages in a voyage to the East Indies; he leaves his wife and offspring a slender pittance to support them till his return . . . and goes cheerily to sea with the prospect of acquiring by the hazards of his voyage a competency for the decline of his years and the raising of his domestic hopes. Suddenly, without any previous declaration, without even

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<sup>84</sup> I arrived at this number through an exhaustive perusal of issues of the *Aurora General Advertiser*. Using *America's Historical Newspapers* database helped the process through keyword searches for the years 1798-1807. The copies for the remaining years, 1808-1812, were read on microfilm.

<sup>85</sup> "Impressment," *Aurora General Advertiser*, 22 August 1803.

a suspicion of war, the vessel is arrested, carried into a port for adjudication, the whole, and among the whole the precious hopes of honesty, industry and virtue, his all – besides his hope – the poor unoffending seamen is ruined – his family is ruined – he is himself put on board a ship of the plunderer, and there during a miserable life compelled to fight the battles of his destroyer – or be hanged for mutiny.<sup>86</sup>

Duane painted a bleak, though realistic, picture of impressment and its repercussions. He asked the farmer and the seaman if a trade agreement (which is what the Monroe-Pinkney treaty amounted to without an anti-impressment provision) was worth such oppression. In a separate but related piece, Duane lamented the indifference shown by some (Federalists) toward impressment. “It is a pity but some of those who think so lightly of the impressment and enslavement of their fellow citizens, could suffer . . . imprisonment within some of the ‘wooden walls’ of their beloved Britain – it might teach them a useful and needed lesson of humanity and sympathy.”<sup>87</sup>

Duane championed egalitarianism. In his estimation, impressment was a matter of equality; equal rights and equal protection, regardless of an individual’s social status. “Advocates for the British navy, seem willing to expose our seamen to the most wanton insults to help England . . . American seamen, they think, are an inferior order of being, and have no rights secure to them while pursuing their maritime occupations.” Duane viewed Federalist leaders as the American aristocracy. He believed them indifferent toward seamen because the only rights Federalists were interested in protecting were their own. If America permitted the tramping of seamen’s liberty, eventually the freedoms of artisans and farmers would be stripped away, as well. To William Duane, impressment was a litmus test for American leaders’ commitment to democracy. Federalists had

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<sup>86</sup> “British Connexion – Perdition!,” *Aurora General Advertiser*, 26 September 1807.

<sup>87</sup> *Aurora General Advertiser*, 4 September 1807.

failed.

Editorials such as these reached every corner of the United States. The *Aurora* had a national subscription.<sup>88</sup> In addition, William Duane sat atop the network of Republican printers. Like-minded editors respected and admired him. His writings were reprinted in other newspapers more frequently than any other printer-editor. The political opinion of William Duane mattered, and that especially included his views on impressment. He continually reminded the public of the capture and coerced service of their fellow citizens and he strove to arouse widespread indignation. Duane was not alone in maintaining this crusade.

Charles Holt was a Connecticut native and in 1797 started the *New London Bee*, which he hoped to be politically impartial. Federalist-controlled Connecticut did not value impartiality and Holt found himself branded a radical. Eventually, these accusations became self-fulfilling prophecies, and Holt's *Bee* turned into one of the most important and influential Republican papers in New England. Influence did not translate to financial stability in Connecticut, however, so in 1802 Holt moved the *Bee* to Hudson, New York.<sup>89</sup>

Whether in New London or Hudson, however, Holt remained dedicated to the liberty of American seamen. He held the Federalist political leadership responsible for the plight of seafarers. "If our government suffers our seafaring citizens to be trepanned into a foreign service . . . they become responsible to God and their country for their oaths, and the consequences to the individuals who suffer." Federalist indifference did

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<sup>88</sup> Pasley, *Tyranny of Printers*, 188.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-47.

not surprise Holt, though, since the ruling party's aristocratic views and Anglophilia naturally resulted in apathy to impressment. "In whatever corner we find outrage upon our citizens, or disregard of our independence and freedom, we find the links of the party formed by England closely connected; the same influence which impresses and trepanns our seamen."<sup>90</sup>

Holt treated impressment as a one sided issue, which it was for the majority of Americans. Although the *Bee* frequently lambasted Federal elitists who minimized impressment or excused the actions of the Royal Navy, Holt's editorials reflected his assumption that "all true Americans" viewed the Royal Navy's resort to forced recruitment with a jaundiced eye.

The severity, the wantonness and cruelty of this nefarious business, with its injurious consequences . . . require no description. How, then, must every American revolt at the knowledge of the cases which are continually occurring of our own citizens being taken from our vessels by British press gangs and carried from their country, their homes, their friends and every thing that can be dear to man, and he obliged to serve and fight for a foreign power. . . . The sensation which is felt toward the authors of this inexcusable and barbarous oppression, we are happy to find is universal.<sup>91</sup>

Although no sentiment commands universal assent, Holt tried to mold public opinion even as he responded to it. The *Bee* printed multiple stories of the suffering caused by impressment, which was a sure way to impassion the public. For instance, Holt related one incident in American waters in which an English frigate stopped a ship and forced an unnamed Irish immigrant into naval service. According to Holt, the Irishman's wife and children, who were also ship passengers, watched helplessly as the press crew

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<sup>90</sup> *New London Bee*, 26 June 1799.

<sup>91</sup> "The Impressment of Seamen," *Hudson Bee*, 6 September 1803.

took him away. Holt's story lacked specifics – the name of the ships, the man's identity, etc. – and was likely apochryphal. The overarching message that Holt drove home in this item was more important: "It is wrong to take from families the staff of their support, and throw helpless women and children upon . . . public maintenance."<sup>92</sup>

Charles Holt used the *Bee* to champion Republican causes in New England. Impressment often played an important role in Holt's efforts to win converts for his party. He emphasized many different issues that sprouted from British manstealing. Federalists' indifference to the plight of their fellow citizens demonstrated their unfitness to govern. Republican efforts to mobilize against impressment proved their dedication to equal rights among Americans. The practice's overwhelming cruelty underscored British tyranny.

In Virginia, Thomas Ritchie echoed many of the same arguments on the pages of his Richmond paper. When Ritchie moved to Richmond in 1803, he had already tried his hand at multiple professions – law, medicine, education – none seemed to satisfy him. Ritchie came to the state capital intent on opening a book shop, but soon reconsidered. The city's previous Jeffersonian newspaper, the *Richmond Examiner*, had failed and no new news outlet arose to tout the virtues the Republicans. President Jefferson appealed to Thomas Ritchie to begin another paper and Ritchie agreed. The *Richmond Enquirer* appeared as a bi-weekly in the spring of 1804 and embarked on a meteoric rise to national prominence.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> "Imprisonment," *Hudson Bee*, 19 October 1810.

<sup>93</sup> Charles Henry Ambler, *Thomas Ritchie: A Study in Virginia Politics* (Richmond, VA: Bell Book & Stationary Co., 1913), 11-13, 18-20.

The *Enquirer* toed the party line for the Jeffersonians as much as any other Republican publication, but Ritchie reckoned himself different from William Duane or Charles Holt. Ritchie was not a working-class radical, but rather a learned southern gentleman who aimed to infuse the *Enquirer* with the gentility missing from other Republican journals. When it came to impressment, though, Ritchie could be as impassioned and radical as his fellow printers.

The *Enquirer* routinely listed the impressment of American seamen foremost among Britain's transgressions. Even during the height of the trade dispute over the Orders in Council, Ritchie never relegated seaman abductions to secondary status.<sup>94</sup> Ritchie believed that impressment alone sufficed to justify war with Great Britain, because as long as impressment persisted, America and England could never be at peace. As he declared:

Is Great Britain prepared to secure our seamen from impressment onboard our ships? Until this point is accommodated . . . . It is of more consequence than even the orders in council; for it is a lasting and festering wound. And it would be even a folly for us to patch up a peace without removing a source of discord which must hereafter lead us into a new war.<sup>95</sup>

The most effective pieces that Ritchie printed on impressment were two letters published under the pseudonym "Ben Bunting." Bunting presented himself as an American seaman once victimized by impressment. There is no indication of who Ben Bunting actually was, and may have been Ritchie himself. Over the course of two issues

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<sup>94</sup> For example, in March 1809, Ritchie published a list of wrongs committed by Great Britain against the United States and impressment was atop the list. On 20 April 1810 in an item concerning peace with Great Britain, Ritchie dismissed Britain's pacific intentions by referencing the continued capture of sailors. "Catalogue of British Injuries and Insults," *Richmond Enquirer*, 28 March 1809; "Notes," *Richmond Enquirer*, 20 April 1810.

<sup>95</sup> *Richmond Enquirer*, 17 August 1812.

the American mariner expounded upon the harsh realities of impressment. The first letter spun the tale of Bunting's impressment from the New York merchant brig *Marianne*: "I was once a freeman – now a slave. . . . I was torn from my friends, from my native country, from the birth right of a freeman." Bunting's capture was a straw man used to rip British pretensions and advance the superiority of American liberties. The initial letter was also used as a call to action. Bunting closed his first letter by posing the question, "now my country has taken her ranks amongst the nations of the Earth. How long will she tolerate the cruelties which are inflicted upon her impressed sons?"<sup>96</sup> The second Bunting letter detailed the tribulations aboard a Royal Navy frigate – the petty tyrannies he had to endure, the physical abuse, fighting against the French, even impressing fellow Americans. "Why should American Seamen be forced to participate in the guilt of such transactions?" Bunting asked the reader. "Remember! There are more than 8000 of your countrymen in this situation!"<sup>97</sup>

The Bunting letters met with a popular reception. They were reprinted in newspapers from New Hampshire to North Carolina.<sup>98</sup> Part of what made them unique was that Ritchie presented the entire saga of a seaman's captivity complete with political commentary. In essence, the Ben Bunting letters were an abbreviated impressment narrative, similar to those of Joshua Davis, Joshua Penny, and others, which proved so popular over the next few years. Among the papers that reprinted the Ben Bunting story was the influential *National Intelligencer*.

The *National Intelligencer* acted as the semi-official mouthpiece of both the

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<sup>96</sup> "Impressment of Seamen," *Richmond Enquirer*, 18 July 1809.

<sup>97</sup> *Richmond Enquirer*, 21 July 1809.

<sup>98</sup> *New Hampshire Gazette*, 19 September 1808; *New Bern Herald*, 30 September 1809.

Jefferson and Madison administrations. The paper was initially run by Samuel Smith, and after Smith's retirement in 1810, Joseph Gales, Jr. Both editors were chosen because they were safe, conservative Republicans.<sup>99</sup> Administration officials largely set the *National Intelligencer's* tone and often wrote its copy. Naturally, the *Intelligencer* exonerated those administration of all blame in any issue. Problems such as impressment were laid at the feet of the Federalist minority or British intransigence. Smith and Gales operated the *Intelligencer* out of Washington DC and thus were less influenced by public opinion. Despite these differences, the fact that the *National Intelligencer* was the administration paper ensured its importance.

*Intelligencer* editorials also differed from those in other journals because they dealt with policy more often. This was because so many of the opinion pieces were written by members of the Jefferson and Madison administration. Thus the *Intelligencer* generally discussed impressment in terms of how manstealing affected Anglo-American relations, rather than taking the more sympathetic, pro-seamen tack adopted by other Republican papers. When Smith or Gales wanted to run a human interest story on impressment, they usually culled something from another paper – such as the Ben Bunting articles. The fact that the *National Intelligencer* printed such pieces could be interpreted as tacit administration support for captive seamen. When Smith or Gales ran a story or editorial concerning impressment, it resonated.

In the summer of 1806, tensions mounted between the United States and Great

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<sup>99</sup> For more on Jefferson's desire for easily controlled editors, see, Pasley, *Tyranny of Printers*, 259. For more on Joseph Gales' conservative Jeffersonian roots, see, Seth Cotlar, "Joseph Gales and the Making of the Jeffersonian Middle Class," in *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race, and the New Republic*, eds., James Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, & Peter Onuf (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2002), 331-54.

Britain. The future of Anglo-American relations was unclear when President Jefferson dispatched William Pinkney to London to help James Monroe negotiate a treaty with England. The *National Intelligencer* ran a lengthy essay on the conduct of Great Britain in an effort to justify Jefferson, regardless of what option he chose – war, trade restrictions, or negotiations. The piece appeared in serialized form over three separate issues. Much of the essay addressed the question of impressment. “Our injuries under this heading are incessant and infinitely vexatious,” the essay began. It went on to explain how Great Britain was on the wrong side of every argument surrounding the capture of seamen, but also boiled down the debate to one simple point: “British navy officers have not a right to board our vessels for the purpose of impressment.”<sup>100</sup> In the paper’s next issue, the column concluded, “Injured so long and so often, and so variously injured, *we do not persuade to war*. ‘Tis enough for us to meet it, *as at Tripoli*, when a better course cannot be pursued.”<sup>101</sup> The fact that the *Intelligencer* could imply such a serious thing meant matters had reached an impasse. This was not the fiery William Duane calling for hostilities with England for the umpteenth time. Samuel Smith was a loyal and self-restrained party functionary. He only printed what the Jefferson administration instructed him to print, so a call to arms from the *Intelligencer* came straight from the usually conflict-averse Jefferson. Likely the threat of war was simply a ploy to gain support for trade restrictions, but Jefferson had gone to war against the Barbary States over an offense similar to impressment, so who could say for sure?

A year later, in the immediate wake of the attack on the USS *Chesapeake*,

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<sup>100</sup> “A Cursory Review of the Conduct of Great Britain, No. II,” *National Intelligencer*, 23 June 1806.

<sup>101</sup> “A Cursory Review of the Conduct of Great Britain, Concluded,” *National Intelligencer*, 25 June 1806.

impressment was once more front and center on the pages of the *Intelligencer*. An anonymous author, writing under the pen name Cato, laid the entire incident at the feet of Great Britain. “The impressment of our seamen may be considered as the original, if not the principal cause of the dispute now existing between Great Britain and the United States.” Cato explained that Jefferson had tried to negotiate an end to impressment but British ministers had refused to compromise. The attack on the *Chesapeake* was unprovoked, and Cato deemed the act, “an outrage *unparalleled* in the *annals* of history, and *unequaled* in atrocity.” Any Federalist attempts to cast aspersions on the Jefferson administration were treasonous and aimed to weaken the nation’s resolve. Cato ended his letter in a call for unity. “Americans! You are not in a *common crisis* – perhaps at this moment our shores are invaded by *piratical bands*, and the blood of your countrymen already shed. . . . Let *unanimity* be the order of the day, for *united we stand, but divided we fall*.”<sup>102</sup> Certainly in July 1807 war with Great Britain was not only possible, but probable. The *Intelligencer* busily laid the groundwork for a declaration of war and the most volatile issue was impressment.

In 1811, when war seemed inevitable, the *Intelligencer* turned to impressment once more for justification. This time the arguments in favor of the United States emanated from an unnamed “British Statesman:” “The oldest and most constant subject of complaint of the American government, is the impressment of their seamen. . . . This must ever be a constant course of irritation . . . because it is degrading to an independent nation and unjust.” The *Intelligencer* predicted that nearly 15,000 American seamen had been forced into the Royal Navy. Impressment was the only issue on which this editorial

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<sup>102</sup> “The Crisis,” *National Intelligencer*, 31 July 1807.

expounded, simply mentioning such other complaints as paper blockades, Native American agitation, and Orders in Council. Even this “British statesman” was convinced that Great Britain was forcing the hand of the United States: “It is as little the policy of the United States to go to war, as it is ours; and we are persuaded, if they have resolved upon it now, or are driven to it at any future period, this ought alone to be ascribed to the weakness and folly of the present ministry.”<sup>103</sup>

Time and again, when the threat of war with Great Britain loomed large over American affairs, both the Jefferson and Madison administrations pointed to impressment as the foundation for hostilities. Did they simply use the issue of captive seamen as justification because it reverberated so deeply among the American people? Or did Republicans repeatedly point to impressment as the root problem because it was the oldest, most consistent complaint in Anglo-American relations? The next chapter will explore those questions more thoroughly. It is interesting, though, that the *National Intelligencer* exhibited such a martial spirit in its editorials when the actual administration of the third and fourth presidents were often so timid. If Jefferson and Madison thought threatening war in the *Intelligencer* would make the British more amenable to a settlement, they miscalculated.

These four newspapers – the *Hudson Bee*, *Richmond Enquirer*, *National Intelligencer*, and especially the *Aurora General Advertiser* – supported American seamen consistently and passionately. It is likely not a coincidence that they were also among the most influential Republican newspapers. William Duane, Charles Holt, and Thomas Ritchie guided their journals to both reflect public opinion and mold it. Many

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<sup>103</sup> “War with America,” *National Intelligencer*, 15 October 1811.

Republican printers considered themselves the champions and spokesmen of the common American.<sup>104</sup> Impressment could not be ignored by these editors because it was important to their target demographic of artisans and farmers. This is doubly true for the *Aurora* and *Bee* (when the latter operated in New London), because Duane and Holt were working in major seaports afflicted by seaman abductions. Printing items on impressment, however, generated more interest in the topic. Such coverage had an incremental effect; the more items a paper ran concerning impressment, the more important the issue became to the public, which in turn led editors to print more material on maritime abductions.

The four papers surveyed here were not the only ones to agitate against impressment. Based in Baltimore, *Niles' Weekly Register* debuted in 1811 and was a strong advocate for those Americans languishing aboard British men of war. Boston's *Independent Chronicle* was an important Republican paper that often featured columns on impressment. In Charleston, the *City Gazette* routinely printed items about British manstealing. *Greenleaf's New York Journal* was an avid supporter of seamen's rights during the Jay Treaty debates.<sup>105</sup> There were other journals, as well, after all impressment had been a motivating issue for Republican politics since 1796. In terms of consistency, sincerity and authority, though, the quartet of papers examined above were unrivaled.

Sometimes an incident possessed such obvious importance that news of it swept

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<sup>104</sup> Pasley, *Tyranny of Printers*, 148, 200.

<sup>105</sup> For examples see, "Impressment," *The Weekly Register*, 2 November 1811; "More British Impressment," *Independent Chronicle*, 29 March 1810; "Impressment," *Charleston City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, 21 September 1805. The role of *Greenleaf's New York Journal* in the anti-Jay Treaty agitation is explored at length in the next chapter.

across the nation, regardless of which paper initially reported it. Obviously the *Chesapeake* affair and the *President-Little Belt* incident come immediately to mind, but there were others which are not as well known today. In July 1805, the frigate HMS *Ville de Milan* rounded up several fishing vessels from Marblehead and Salem trolling the waters of the Grand Banks, off Newfoundland. The British pressed sixteen American fishermen into service aboard the man of war. Impressment had been an issue for more than a decade, but this was the first time the Royal Navy victimized fishermen. Even in Great Britain fishermen and whalers were exempt from the press. The *Salem Register* initially reported the incident on 22 July 1805.<sup>106</sup> The news spread rapidly. Papers in Boston and Newburyport announced the impressments the next day. On 24 July 1805, the story appeared in the *New York Daily Advertiser*. Six days later, the abductions were on the front page of the *Alexandria Daily Advertiser*. The *National Intelligencer* printed the item on 2 August; and on 8 August 1805 – less than three weeks after the initial story broke – the *Charleston City Gazette* informed its readers in South Carolina and northern Georgia of the impressment of sixteen New England fishermen.<sup>107</sup>

Another demonstration of the remarkable ability of American newspaper to rapidly disseminate information across the country occurred a year later. On 25 April 1806, the merchant sloop *Richard* was returning to its home port of New York. After cruising past Sandy Hook, the *Richard* sighted HMS *Leander* bearing down upon it. The Royal Navy frigate signaled the sloop to hove to, but Jesse Pierce – master of the *Richard*

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<sup>106</sup> “Fishermen Impressed!,” *Salem Register*, 22 July 1805.

<sup>107</sup> “Fishermen Impressed!!,” *The Independent Chronicle; Newburyport Herald*, 23 July 1805; *New York Daily Advertiser*, 24 July 1805; “Impressment of Fishermen,” *Alexandria Daily Advertiser*, 1 August 1805; *National Intelligencer*, 2 August 1805; “Impressment of Fishermen,” *Charleston City Gazette*, 8 August 1805.

– refused. After all, his ship was in American waters and he felt no obligation to obey the commands of a foreign warship. The *Leander* fired a warning shot across the *Richard*'s bow, and when the sloop showed no sign of slowing, the frigate fired a second warning shot. Poorly aimed, this shot struck the *Richard*'s quarterdeck and decapitated the pilot, John Pierce.<sup>108</sup>

“The Murder of Pierce,” as the incident came to be known, gripped the American public. Pierce received a public funeral attended by thousands, complete with a mile-long procession through New York City. Broadside damned the British and honored the slain pilot. Pamphlets appeared condemning Captain Henry Whitby of the *Leander* as a murderer.<sup>109</sup> The New York papers obviously reported the incident first. On 28 April 1806, description of John Pierce's death and public funeral arrangements adorned the front pages of New York's *Evening Post*, *Daily Advertiser*, *American Citizen*, and the *Morning Chronicle*.<sup>110</sup> The next day, Philadelphia's *Aurora General Advertiser* and *United States Gazette* ran features on Peirce's death. By 1 May, many Connecticut and upstate New York papers had carried the story. *The Independent Chronicle* reported the outrage to Bostonians on 3 May. The *Brattleboro Reporter*, serving rural Vermont, announced the incident the same day. The *Richmond Enquirer* declared the city of New York under a blockade when Ritchie disclosed the news on 6 May. A week later, the *Charleston Courier* printed the details of Pierce's killing. The news reached the West

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<sup>108</sup> “Deposition of Jesse Pierce,” *New York Morning Chronicle*, 28 April 1806.

<sup>109</sup> “The Murdered Pierce,” broadside collection, NYHS; *The Trial of Captain Henry Whitby for the Murder of John Pierce, with his Dying Declaration* (New York: Gould, Banks & Gould, 1812).

<sup>110</sup> “MURDER!,” *New York Daily Advertiser*, 28 April 1806; “Sycophants and Dependents,” *New York Morning Chronicle*, 28 April 1806; “City of New York,” *New York American Citizen*, 28 April 1806; “Millions for Tribute – Not a Dime for Defence; Or, the Murder of John Pierce,” *New York Evening Post*, 28 April 1806.

Indies by mid-May through the pages of the *Bermuda Gazette and Weekly Advertiser*.<sup>111</sup> Accounts of John Pierce's death and public memorial continued to rate headlines throughout the summer of 1806.

Newspapers were powerful. The nation-wide network of editors was able to inform the country of the most vital affairs with surprising speed. Although broadside ballads, poems, and plays were important in enlightening the American public of the suffering caused by impressment, the reach of those cultural mediums paled in comparison to the influence of newspapers. Of course, many newspapers printed those same ballads and poems. The news coverage of impressment did not always rise to the dramatic height portrayed in ballads, but the plight of seamen and their families did not go unnoticed by the press. Since many newspaper printer/editors came from humble origins, most were probably familiar with the suffering of Jack Tar on a personal level. Impressment became an issue that stirred the passions of the American people, as well. These sentiments may have convinced printers to increase their focus on impressment, which further energized the public. Regardless, captive seamen and their suffering families found a prominent niche in the public consciousness. Most Americans never understood the full, devastating cost of impressment. It was impossible for editors or politicians to know the toll that impressment exacted on the children of Southwark or the women of New York. Death and poverty were a constant presence in the lives of America's working poor. It was evident, though, that impressment exacerbated a difficult existence. A massive groundswell of support took shape on behalf of the

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<sup>111</sup> "John Pierce," *Aurora General Advertiser*, 29 April 1806; "City of New York," *United States Gazette*, 29 April 1806; *Connecticut Journal*, 1 May 1806; "Murder of Pierce!!," *Independent Chronicle*, 3 May 1806; "The Murder of Pierce," *Brattleboro Reporter*, 3 May 1806; "New York Blockaded," *Richmond Enquirer*, 6 May 1806; "John Pierce," *Bermuda Gazette and Weekly Advertiser*, 17 May 1806.

nation's abducted sailors, which compelled the Federal government to try and find a solution to the impressment crisis. The nature of that public pressure and the failed attempts of the United States government to find a diplomatic or legislative solution to impressment is the focus of the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE:  
“A LOUD EXPRESSION OF PUBLIC INDIGNATION:”  
THE ATTEMPTS OF THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT TO END  
IMPRESSMENT

Representative George Campbell took the floor of the House of Representatives and declared to his fellow legislators: “The outrages committed on our citizens have made an impression on the public mind that demands on our part the adoption of some decisive measure to correct the growing evil.”<sup>1</sup> Campbell referred, of course, to the impressment of American seamen. He also spoke to the continuous pressure the American public exerted on the Federal government to find a solution to the dilemma. The public manifested its demands primarily through letters and petitions to the Federal government and through the press. Equally important were the protests sent by impressed seamen themselves, which served as a constant reminder of the victimization of United States citizens. A pattern emerged over the years that demonstrated a clear correlation between public pressure and government action. American leadership routinely accelerated its efforts to negotiate or legislate an easing or cessation to impressment when the public calls for action swelled. The impressment quandary proved unsolvable, but not from lack support from the American public or for the lack effort by the United States.

The first manifestation of popular indignation over impressment erupted in 1796. Prior to that year, impressment had been a minor problem, one the administration of George Washington was the not terribly concerned with solving. Between 1792 and 1795, the Federal government received only ten letters or petitions from the public

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<sup>1</sup> *Annals of Congress of the United States*, 9<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, 708.

demanding greater protection for American seamen.<sup>2</sup> The State Department acknowledged receipt of just forty-four appeals from impressed tars during the same time period.<sup>3</sup> American newspapers were likewise not overly concerned – in a sampling of eighteen newspapers, a total of forty-five news stories or editorials were printed during the three-year span.<sup>4</sup> Only Thomas Jefferson, as Washington’s Secretary of State, warned against the seriousness of impressment: “The practice in Great Britain of impressing seamen whenever war is apprehended will fall more heavily on [American seamen.]” Jefferson encouraged Washington to find a diplomatic and legislative solution to the problem early on. Jefferson conceded that reaching an agreement would not be easy, but it was necessary for the United States “to extend to our seafaring citizens the protection of which they have so much need.”<sup>5</sup> Washington felt no real domestic pressure to defend American sailors, and therefore largely ignored Jefferson’s advice.

Congress was no more proactive than the President during these early years of the impressment crisis. Maryland representative William Vans Murray made the only notable attempt to end the pressing of American seamen. In May 1794, Murray proposed that Congress form a committee to provide American seamen with evidence of their

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<sup>2</sup> Letters Concerning Impressed Seamen, Records of Impressed Seamen 1793-1815, Records of the Department of State, Record Grouping 59, Entry 928, Nation Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, Maryland.

<sup>3</sup> Application Index 1794-97, RG 59, Entry 935, NACP.

<sup>4</sup> This number is based off a survey of eighteen newspaper titles; *Aurora General Advertiser*, *Greenleaf’s New York Journal & Patriotic Register*, *Baltimore Daily Gazette*, *Western Advertiser* (Cooperstown, NY), *Eastern Herald* (Portland, ME), *Political Gazette* (Newburyport, MA), *Gazette of the United States* (Philadelphia, PA), *The Philadelphia Gazette*, *The Virginia Chronicle and Daily Advertiser* (Norfolk, VA), *The Daily Advertiser* (New York, NY), *American Minerva* (New York), *Columbian Centinel* (Boston, MA), *New Hampshire Gazette* (Portsmouth), *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser* (Charleston, SC), *American Apollo* (Boston), *Connecticut Courant* (Hartford), *The Diary, or Loudon’s Register* (New York), and *The United States Chronicle* (Providence, RI).

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, 7 February 1792; *American State Papers, Series 1, Foreign Relations*, 1:131.

citizenship in order to protect them while in foreign ports. Although Murray recognized that no form of identification could stop impressment, he hoped a certificate of citizenship could damper the Royal Navy's aggression until the United States and Great Britain reached some accommodation "relative to alienage and allegiance."<sup>6</sup>

A congressional committee was formed and three weeks later proposed a national register of American seamen to protect sailors from impressment. The proposed bill encountered opposition on several grounds: the register offered no protection to naturalized citizens or resident foreigners, the whole concept of a national register was impractical since sailors were such a fluid body of laborers, and one congressman even objected on the grounds that seamen were going to be abducted even if there was a countrywide enrollment. Murray's bill was tabled and nearly two years passed before Congress made another attempt to offer Federal protection to American seamen.<sup>7</sup>

The American people were first moved to remonstrate against impressment by the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between the United States and Great Britain, better known as the Jay Treaty. More specifically, the absence of a provision protecting American seamen stirred the public's anger. President Washington appointed Chief Justice John Jay special envoy to Great Britain in the spring of 1794 to negotiate a settlement on the myriad issues creating tension between the two nations. Jay's instructions from Secretary of State Edmund Randolph (Jefferson resigned in 1793) made no mention of impressment.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, during Jay broached the issue of American

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<sup>6</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 703-704.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 772-74.

seamen forced to serve in the Royal Navy during his negotiations with British Foreign Secretary Lord Grenville. Jay informed Grenville that he would not “dwell on the *injuries* done to the unfortunate individuals, or on the *emotions* they must naturally excite.” Instead, the American envoy expressed confidence that “orders will be given that Americans so circumstanced, be immediately liberated, and that persons, honored with His Majesty’s commissions, do, in future, abstain from any similar violences.”<sup>9</sup> Grenville assured Jay that the impressment of Americans was “contrary to the King’s desire.” The British Secretary believed that any cases of captive Americans were an accidental and, while there was “no reason to doubt His Majesty’s intentions respecting this point are already sufficiently understood [by Royal Navy officers] . . . instructions to the effect desired” were renewed in accordance to Jay’s wishes.<sup>10</sup> Grenville’s assurances satisfied Jay and there was no further discussion of impressment.<sup>11</sup>

Upon receiving a draft of the treaty, Washington worried that the Senate would not ratify the agreement, and prepared for its rejection with a contingency plan to revisit the treaty’s shortcomings. The first item on Washington’s agenda was “to provide some clear distinction against the impressment of our citizens.”<sup>12</sup> Washington expressed

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<sup>8</sup> Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton was more influential in outlining the instructions for Jay than Randolph. Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 396-97. *ASP: Foreign Relations*, 1:472-74.

<sup>9</sup> John Jay to Lord Grenville, 30 July 1794, *ASP: FR*, 1:481.

<sup>10</sup> Grenville to Jay, 1 August 1794, *Ibid.*, 484.

<sup>11</sup> Jerald A. Combs, *The Jay Treaty: Political Battleground of the Founding Fathers* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970), 155-56.

<sup>12</sup> Edmund Randolph to John Jay, 16 August 1795, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Digital Edition*, 27 vols., ed. Harold C. Syrett (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2011), vol. 19.

sympathy for those critics of the Jay Treaty angry over impressment.<sup>13</sup> The Senate surprised Washington by ratifying the treaty, however, and the president's most trusted advisor, Alexander Hamilton, defended impressment's omission: "A general stipulation against the impressment of our seamen would have been nugatory if not derogatory. Our right to exemption is perfect by the laws of nations . . . The difficulty has been and is to fix a rule of evidence by which to discriminate our seamen from theirs."<sup>14</sup> Additionally, John Jay stressed the difficulty of finding common ground with the British on the issue of impressment. "Any satisfactory arrangement on that Head will I fear continue to prove an arduous task," Jay wrote.<sup>15</sup> The President needed no further convincing.<sup>16</sup> Critics of the Jay Treaty, however, latched onto the absence of a provision protecting American seamen.

The citizens of Charleston sent President Washington a memorial detailing the shortcomings of the Jay Treaty: "No provision is made to protect and secure [American seamen] from being impressed into British service, though daily experience evinces the necessity of requiring a clear and unequivocal stipulation for the protection and security of that most valuable class of men."<sup>17</sup> New Yorkers, meanwhile, demonstrated a similar concern for merchant sailors. "Many of our seamen have, during the present war, been

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<sup>13</sup> Washington to James Monroe, 25 August 1796, George Washington Papers, Series 2 Letterbooks, Library of Congress online.

<sup>14</sup> "Defense No. VI," *PAH Digital Edition*, vol. 19.

<sup>15</sup> John Jay to George Washington, 3 September 1795, GWP, Series 4 General Correspondence, LC online.

<sup>16</sup> Scott T. Jackson, "Impressment and Anglo-American Discord," PhD Diss., University of Michigan (1976), 93-94.

<sup>17</sup> The Citizens Committee of Charleston, SC to George Washington, memorial, 19 July 1795, GWP, Series 2 Letterbooks, LC online.

impressed in the English service,” the New Yorkers complained. “Although this grievance was universally known and reprobated, the aggression is passed over in silence, nor is any care even taken to guard against the repetition of so atrocious an outrage.”<sup>18</sup> A public meeting in Baltimore raised similar complaints: “Our seamen, citizens of the United States, arbitrarily and unjustly taken from our ships and detained on board British ships of war, are not restored; nor is any security contemplated against future aggressions of the same kind.”<sup>19</sup> Other town meetings cited the vulnerability of seamen as a glaring weakness of the Jay Treaty, as well, including Wilmington, Delaware; Newport, Rhode Island; and Amelia Courthouse, Virginia.

Town meetings constituted a critical aspect of the mobilization against the Jay Treaty, but they were hardly the only source of vitriol aimed at the settlement’s flaws.

Opposition journalists rallied against the treaty. Thomas Greenleaf, a noted anti-Federalist during the ratification debates, used his newspaper, *Greenleaf’s New York Journal and Patriotic Register*, to highlight the shortcomings in the Anglo-American accord. In an editorial signed “An American Seamen, Pressed and Lately Escaped,” Greenleaf attempted to refute Alexander Hamilton’s aforementioned argument regarding the absence of an impressment provision. Concurrently, he introduced a class-based argument to demonstrate the monarchial aloofness of the Federalist elite:

As to American seamen being enslaved by the British, tore from families and friends, and compelled to assist in horrid depredations . . . the King of England wanted seamen, his sailors and ours resemble each other, and men are not

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<sup>18</sup> New York Citizens to George Washington, memorial, 20 July 1795, *ibid*.

<sup>19</sup> Address from the Citizens of Baltimore to the President of the United States, in *The American Remembrancer: or, An Impartial Collection of Essays, Resolves, Speeches, etc., Relative or Having Affinity to the Treaty with Great Britain*, ed. Matthew Carey, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: 1795), 107.

distinguishable like other things, hence he concludes they can hardly be identified by actual proof . . . The defense of the common rank of men is no object to an aristocrat, when the joint demands of the aristocracy and monarchy demand their sacrifice.<sup>20</sup>

In Philadelphia, Greenleaf's fellow editors Matthew Carey and Benjamin Bache, attacked the Jay Treaty. Carey, writing under the pseudonym Caius, directed a scathing letter to President Washington on the failures of John Jay as a negotiator. "He omitted to make any convention or stipulation for the protection of American seamen from impressment . . . or otherwise secure them against those shameful imprisonment and detentions which have become a national grievance to the United States."<sup>21</sup> Bache, in the *Aurora General Advertiser*, wrote sarcastically of the gratitude American sailors should feel for Alexander Hamilton's defense of the Jay Treaty. "American seamen must feel great obligations to him for his defense of impressment, and those engaged in the American commerce must feel a double gratitude, for defending the trade of kidnapping."<sup>22</sup> In South Carolina, *Charleston City Gazette* editors, Robert Haswell and John M'Iver were especially vociferous in criticizing the treaty's seeming indifference toward American mariners. "In British ports our sailors our hunted down like thieves and murderers, confined on board British hulks, not knowing wither they are to go, what danger they shall encounter, nor when they will be liberated." Since the Anglo-American accord made no attempt to rectify impressment, Haswell and M'Iver concluded, "I feel myself at a loss to discover upon what principles we are to ratify it [the treaty.]"<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Greenleaf's New York Journal and Patriotic Register*, 9 December 1795.

<sup>21</sup> "Caius's Address to the President of the United States," *American Remembrancer*, 1:107.

<sup>22</sup> "From a Correspondent," *Aurora General Advertiser*, 15 August 1795.

<sup>23</sup> *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, 14 August 1795.

One thing all opposition newspapers had in common was the printing of Robert Livingston's "Cato" essays. Livingston was the patriarch of the powerful Hudson Valley Livingstons and, in 1795, was midway through his career as Chancellor of New York, the highest judicial office in the state. A firm and early opponent of the Jay Treaty, Livingston expressed his views in a series of fifteen essays published under the pseudonym Cato. Livingston exposed every defect in the treaty as he argued against its ratification.<sup>24</sup> Livingston turned his attention to the plight of American seamen in five different essays, most notably in "Cato II" and "Cato III." In the former, Livingston argued that by ignoring the issue of impressment in negotiations with Great Britain, the United States had failed to provide "that valuable protection which is due to every citizen and which indeed is the great end of government."<sup>25</sup> Livingston expanded on his arguments even more in the subsequent essay.

The individual loss to seamen who were discharged from their ships, compelled by force, reduced by absolute want to enter into the British service in the West Indies, where great numbers of them died of the differences of climate, and the ill usage of their oppressors . . . the treaty makes no kind of provision for these worthy and unhappy citizens, or for the families of those that have perished – disgraceful and unfeeling omission!

In speaking of our seamen . . . he [Jay] contents himself with only requesting that they may be liberated, and unmolested, in future, without a word of compensation for the past. The reply of Lord Grenville is in the same stile. Not a word of instructions, not a word of apology to the American nation, not a word of compensation . . . The British nation is supposed, in all these proceeding, to be immaculate.<sup>26</sup>

Of course there was a rebuttal to the Cato pieces. Alexander Hamilton and Rufus King (with John Jay advising) penned a series of thirty-eight essays under the name of

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<sup>24</sup> Elkins and McKittrick, *Age of Federalism*, 46, 432-33, 839 ff 168.

<sup>25</sup> "Cato No. II," *American Remembrancer*, 1:119-22.

<sup>26</sup> "Cato No. III," *ibid.*, 1:147-52, quote 149.

“Camillus.” The Camillus editorials explained the virtues of the Jay Treaty. Camillus only addressed the impressment issue one time to explain the difficulty in reaching any sort of arrangement because of the similarities between Englishmen and Americans and Britain’s tenacious adherence to infeasible allegiance. Even so, the Camillus essays were highly effective.<sup>27</sup>

Hamilton’s support campaign for the Jay Treaty appeared so persuasive that Thomas Jefferson appealed to Madison to enter the essay fray. “For God’s sake,” pled Jefferson, “take up your pen, and give fundamental reply to Curtius and Camillus.”<sup>28</sup> George Nichols, Madison’s friend and political ally, likewise implored him to stand against Hamilton and the treaty, lest “the fire of liberty” be “extinguished in Eastern America. It will, I think, depend much on you, whether the day of its extinguishment, shall soon arrive in that quarter, or be postponed to a distant period.”<sup>29</sup> Madison, however, declined to take up the fight against the Jay Treaty in the country’s newspapers, handbills, or pamphlets. He hoped to win the battle in the national legislature.

Madison was not the only Republican heavyweight to abstain from the essay battle. In fact, with the exception of Robert Livingston and Alexander Dallas, most Republicans opted to take the fight to more formal political settings. Virginia Senator Henry Tazewell made his stand on the Senate floor. “New outrages are daily committing

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<sup>27</sup> Elkins and McKittrick, *Age of Federalism*, 301; Todd Estes, *The Jay Treaty Debate, Public Opinion, and the Evolution of Early American Political Culture* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006), 83-87, 94-95.

<sup>28</sup> Jefferson to Madison, 21 September 1795, *The Republic of Letters: The Correspondence Between Jefferson and Madison, 1776-1826*, ed. James Morton Smith, vol. 2 (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 898. Curtius was another anonymous supporter of the Jay Treaty – in fact, Noah Webster, the Connecticut Federalist and famed text-book author. Elkins and McKittrick, *Age of Federalism*, 839 ff 168.

<sup>29</sup> George Nicholas to James Madison, 8 November 1795, *The Papers of James Madison, Congressional Series*, ed. J.C.A. Stagg, vol. 16 (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 120.

on our Seamen. . . . Impressments have become as common from American ships, as from British ships . . . our Seamen are thrown into their [the British] power, and are then in all respects considered as British seamen . . . our Government must not be so patient.”<sup>30</sup> Tazewell made a motion in the Senate proceedings that Washington be advised not to sign the treaty, but he was voted down. Every anti-administration Senator voted against the pact, but Federalists held a two-to-one advantage in that legislative body.<sup>31</sup> Caesar Rodney, on the cusp of a lengthy and distinguished political career, offered stirring arguments against the Jay Treaty at a Republican meeting in Wilmington, Delaware. “Our sailors have been cruelly and unjustly pressed from on board our vessels. . . . Has any provision been made to secure our helpless seamen from being dragged from on board our merchant vessels?” Rodney asked. “No!” he answered, “They are still left to the mercy of a merciless nation.”<sup>32</sup> Virginian William Branch Giles explained the flaws of each clause of the Jay Treaty to the House of Representatives. Giles turned to the question of impressment during his analysis of the twenty-third article, which provided for the hospitable reception of ships of war and proper conduct towards naval officers and crew. Giles was appalled that instead of an article protecting American seamen, “the officers and crews of those very ships of war . . . engaged in the unauthorized impressments are to be hospitably received in the ports of the United States. . . . Strange substitute, this, for the protection of American seamen!”<sup>33</sup> Half a dozen other

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<sup>30</sup> Henry Tazewell to James Madison, 30 August 1795, *PJM*, CS, 16:62.

<sup>31</sup> Henry Tazewell to Thomas Jefferson, 1 July 1795, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. John Catanzariti, vol. 28 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 399-400.

<sup>32</sup> “Speech of Caesar Rodney at a meeting of the citizens of Wilmington, Delaware, 4 August 1795,” *American Remembrancer*, 1:32.

<sup>33</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 4<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, 1042.

stalwart Republican representatives argued that the Royal Navy's continued impressment of American seamen since the signing of the treaty was evidence that Britain had negotiated in bad faith. They urged that the pact be abandoned on that basis alone.<sup>34</sup>

Despite Republicans' best efforts to continue the struggle against the Jay Treaty, opposition among the American populace gradually evaporated. Benjamin Rush best described the shift in public temperament: "Once reprobated by nineteen twentieths of our citizens, [the treaty] is now approved of, or peaceably acquiesced in, by the same proportion of the people."<sup>35</sup> Why the reversal? Some historians, such as Paul Varg, argue that the defenders of the Jay Treaty, particularly Alexander Hamilton, made more compelling arguments than Robert Livingston. The Republican case against the treaty was based on high-minded ideals, whereas Hamilton and the Federalists were far more pragmatic.<sup>36</sup> Other historians think that George Washington's support for the treaty made the general public more reluctant to criticize the pact and thereby criticize the President.<sup>37</sup> Perhaps the best explanation was made by Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick. They argued that the sentimental shift favoring the Jay Treaty was rooted in self-interest. The British evacuation of western frontier posts, combined with Major General Anthony Wayne's victory at Fallen Timbers, opened the Northwest for settlement. Spain granted Americans full usage of the Mississippi River. The carrying trade with Great Britain and

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<sup>34</sup> Specifically, this argument was also made by James Madison, John Heath, John Page, William Findley, and Albert Gallatin. See their speeches in, *Annals of Congress*, 4<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 985, 1064, 1098, 1114, & 1197.

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin Rush to Samuel Bayard, 1 March 1796, *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, ed. Lyman H. Butterfield, vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 768-69.

<sup>36</sup> Paul Varg, *Foreign Policies of the Founding Fathers* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1963), 113-14; Estes, 105-11.

<sup>37</sup> Walter Stahr, *John Jay: Founding Father* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2005), 337-38; Frank Monaghan, *John Jay: Defender of Liberty* (New York: Bobb-Merill Co., 1935), 396-97.

her West Indies colonies created considerable prosperity. All of those gains could be lost if the Jay Treaty failed.<sup>38</sup> By the end of April 1796, many House Republicans changed their views of the pact to more closely match those of their constituents. The House of Representatives passed the appropriations necessary for the execution of the treaty in a series of votes on April 29 and 30, 1796.<sup>39</sup>

James Madison ignored the early debates on the Jay Treaty in hopes of winning the legislative battle. His gamble failed. The efforts made resisting the agreement with Britain were not in vain, however, particularly regarding impressment. Scott T. Jackson, in his research on impressment, concluded that the Republican support for seamen was merely political pandering.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, Jerald Combs, in his work on the Jay Treaty, believed that impressment was a non-issue: “The problem did not loom as large as it later did. . . . Under these circumstances, the omission of the article prohibiting impressment of American citizens was of little moment.”<sup>41</sup> The arguments of Jackson and Combs are undermined by subsequent events, however.

The absence of a seamen provision was merely one in a myriad of complaints about the Jay Treaty. The lack of compensation for slaves carried away by the British at the end of the Revolution and trade restrictions placed on American shipping, for example, weighed heavily on the treaty debate.<sup>42</sup> The impressment issue was significant

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<sup>38</sup> Elkins and McKittrick, *Age of Federalism*, 432.

<sup>39</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 4<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1264-92.

<sup>40</sup> Jackson, “Impressment and Anglo-American Discord,” 102-04.

<sup>41</sup> Combs, *The Jay Treaty*, 156.

<sup>42</sup> Combs, *The Jay Treaty*, 153-57; Elkins and McKittrick, *Age of Federalism*, 115-22; Jackson, “Impressment and Anglo-American Discord,” 95.

enough, though, to merit its own, separate legislation. The Act for the Relief and Protection of American Seamen was a direct result of the Jay Treaty's failure to account for impressment. The subsequent outcry should not be dismissed too quickly as political opportunism or being "of little moment." Unlike slave reparations and trade restriction, which largely concerned the privileged, impressment impassioned the American populace and they demanded action.

In the House of Representatives, Edward Livingston initially broached the subject of the United States government's responsibility to protect American seamen. Edward Livingston was the younger brother of Robert Livingston and represented New York City in the national legislature. He first introduced the issue of impressment in mid-February 1796 by delineating the three types of American seamen – native American, naturalized citizen, and European – and insisting they were all entitled to equal protection under United States law. "These men . . . sailing under the American flag, have been illegally seized," he declared, "cruelly torn from their friends and country, and ignominiously scourged; yet this country has for three years been silent, looking upon their sufferings with listless apathy." After lamenting the Jay Treaty's silence regarding impressment, Livingston moved that a committee be formed to examine the problem and propose a remedy.<sup>43</sup> The House responded by assigning Livingston to the committee, together with fellow Republicans Samuel Smith (MD) and John Swanwick (PA), as well as Federalist representatives William Smith (SC) and Benjamin Bourne (RI). The committee reported back in less than a week and recommended that two agents be assigned to offices in England and the West Indies. The agents' duties included inquiring into the cases of

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<sup>43</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 4<sup>th</sup> Con., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 344.

individual seamen, securing the release of as many impressed Americans as possible, and deducing the total number of captive American tars. Additionally, the committee urged that sailors be provided with evidence of their citizenship in hopes of decreasing the number of impressments.<sup>44</sup>

In the tense partisan atmosphere of Philadelphia, no proposed legislation was passed without a spirited debate. The proposed bill on impressed seamen was no exception. House Federalists were the primary opposition to the committee's recommendation. Their objections tended to follow three lines of dispute. Alternately, Federalists argued that "the evil complained of did not exist to any alarming degree,"<sup>45</sup> that many of those impressed were foreign seamen or expatriated British subjects, and finally, they questioned the necessity of creating a new agency when consuls already existed.

Republicans responded to the Federalist concerns with candid answers. How extensive was the impressment problem? Livingston explained that the legislation was designed to achieve a more accurate understanding regarding the number of Americans compelled to serve in the Royal Navy.<sup>46</sup> Were all seamen pressed off American vessels American citizens? "[I] could not say they were always Americans," admitted Samuel Smith, "but they were men sailing under the authority of the American flag. We have a flag, under that flag men are seized, and they have a right . . . to expect redress from

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 382-91.

<sup>46</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 4<sup>th</sup> Con., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 387.

Government.”<sup>47</sup> Why create a special agent when there were already consuls? Madison replied, “Consuls are unequal to the task. . . . It is a heavy business. . . . If an agent or agents should be sent to Great Britain, no other business will require his or their attention.”<sup>48</sup>

The debate over the proposed bill did not last long – less than two days – before the special committee was ordered to prepare an official draft. There was some more minor debate when Livingston presented the finalized bill to the House. That discussion revolved around the difficulties in protecting foreign and naturalized seamen. Maryland Federalist William Vans Murray predicted that Great Britain would not recognize the naturalization of any subject who immigrated to the United States after 1783. Likewise, South Carolinian Robert Goodloe Harper (F) warned that impressment “had always been . . . and would always be found a delicate and difficult subject; and whatever measures were adopted would be very doubtful in their effect.”<sup>49</sup> The observations of both men proved prophetic. Livingston, Madison, Gallatin, and the other supporters of the Seamen’s Bill made a stronger plea for the necessity of the bill. The vast majority of congressmen (including Harper in the final vote) agreed. Although there were some detractors, most members of the House were in favor of the legislation. The Act for the Relief and Protection of American Seamen passed the House by a vote of 77 to 13, and easily passed through the Senate a month later.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 388.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 389.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 804-05, quote 810.

<sup>50</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 4<sup>th</sup> Con., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 820

The Seamen's Act was imperfect. The Royal Navy never recognized the legitimacy of American protection certificates and the process by which an agent secured a seaman's release was often lengthy. The conflicting views of American and British officials on naturalized American citizens and the doctrine of indefeasible allegiance was the greatest stumbling block in the successful execution of the Seamen's Act. Historian Bradford Perkins assessed the legislation in particularly harsh terms, arguing: "The ill-advised legislation of 1796 not only failed of its purpose but destroyed as well a workable, though limited arrangement."<sup>51</sup> Perkins' assessment of the Seamen's Act was biased, though, prepossessed as he was with the British side of the debate. From the American perspective, the act accomplished a great deal over the next sixteen years, despite its foibles. The relief agents created by the act secured the release of more than 4,200 seamen between 1796 and 1812. Taken as a percentage of all sailors who applied for relief, 4,200 translates to approximately 34 percent. A success rate of one-third hardly seems an accomplishment, but the achievements of the Seamen Act are more significant when compared with the percentage of discharges pre-agency. Prior to the legislation, less than 20 percent of captive Americans were released in Great Britain and none were liberated in the West Indies.<sup>52</sup> The act was also effective in discerning the magnitude of the impressment problem. Pressed American seamen received a concrete way to notify the United States government of their situation and the relief agents kept accurate indices of the individual circumstances of imprisoned sailors.

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<sup>51</sup> Bradford Perkins, *The First Rapprochement: England and the United States, 1795-1805* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), 63.

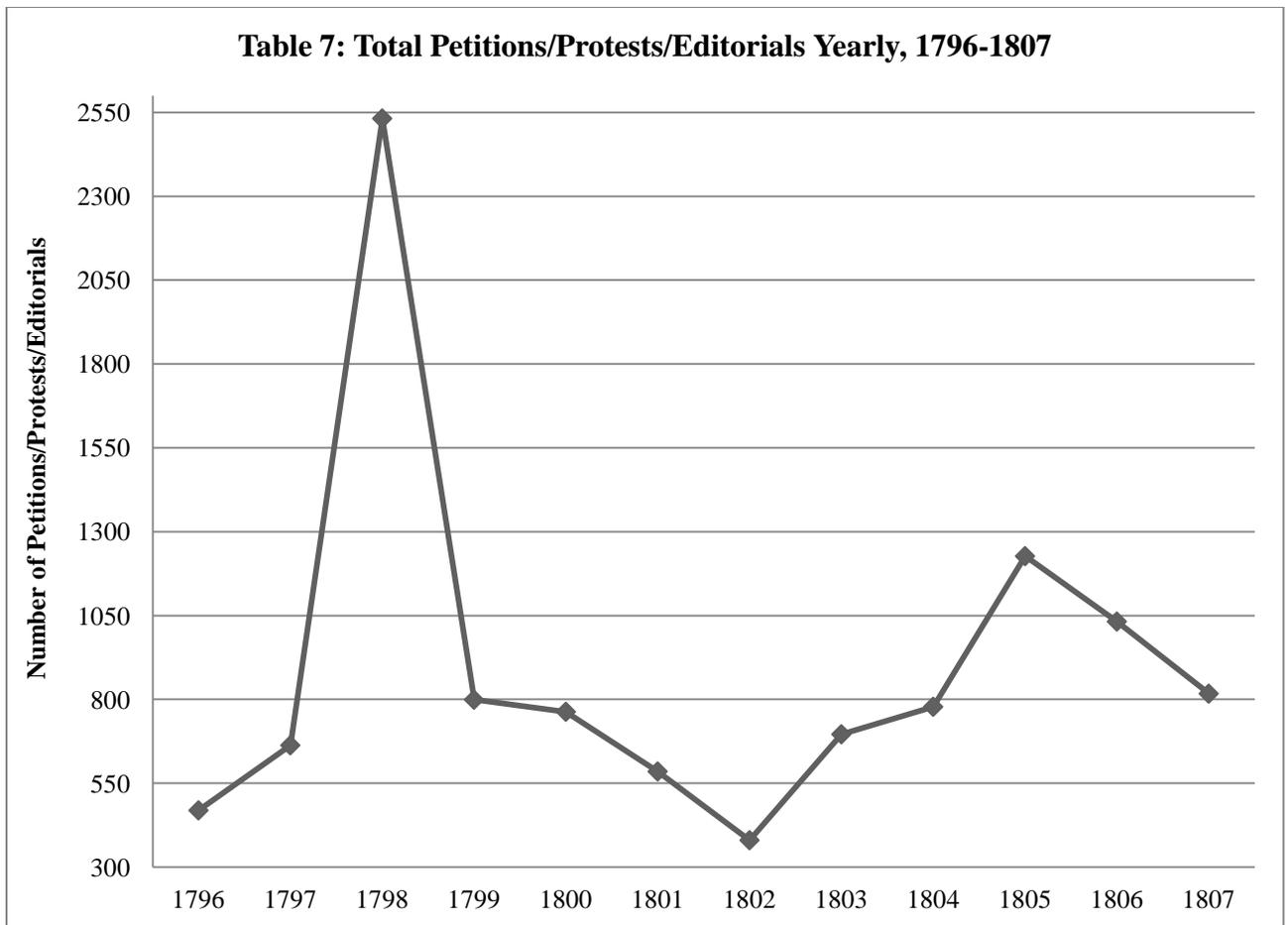
<sup>52</sup> These percentages are based off the information provided by the relief agents in their quarterly returns, along with my own estimate of the number of seamen released in the West Indies after the creation of the agents, based off the papers of Silas Talbot. RG 59, Entries 931, 932, 933, 934, 935, and 936, NACP; Silas Talbot Papers, G.W. Blunt-White Library, Mystic Seaport, Mystic, CT.

One of the inevitable results of the creation and record keeping of the relief agency was greater public awareness about the severity of impressment. The agents in London sent the State Department an abstract of impressments every three months. The summaries included the number of applicants since the last report, how many had been release as American citizens, how many had been retained for various reasons, and the amount of open cases remaining.<sup>53</sup> Additionally, the process which granted an American his freedom from the Royal Navy required the active aid of the sailor's friends and family. The growth of information combined with the advent of public participation in the relief procedure helped spread awareness.

The process was cyclical. Agitation over impressment spurred government action, which kept the public better informed about abductions, so when the number of impressments swelled, the people learned of the increase and grew restive, starting the process anew. In 1796, the number of seaman abductions more than doubled from the year before, and in 1797 nearly doubled once more. The culmination of all of these factors was a considerable escalation, beginning late in 1796, in the number of protests and petitions sent to the Federal government demanding a resolution to the impressment problem. In particular, the year 1798 – the first full, effective year of the Seamen's Act – saw an incredible amount of agitation. [Table 7]

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<sup>53</sup> The annual returns can be found on RG 59, Entry 933, 934, 935, and 936, NACP.



The remainder of the chapter will show the responses by the Federal government as both the national legislature and State Department worked to satisfy the public’s calls for action. Since American law had no jurisdiction over Royal Navy officers, Congress focused primarily on ways to better protect American seamen. Eventually, the nation’s lawmakers turned to more proactive measures, aimed at punishing British aggression in hopes of containing impressment. The Executive Branch efforts centered on arranging a formal treaty banning impressment on the high seas. The endeavors to legislate or negotiate a cessation to impressment yielded little, but the continuous pressure exerted by the American people ensured that the United States’ leaders made repeated attempts.

By 1798, it had become obvious that the Seamen's Act was imperfect. The incredible number of petitions, protests, and appeals submitted to the State Department made it clear that the law needed reexamined. The seamen's protections provided for in the act had done little to slow the rate of impressment. In fact, the number of seizures had increased tremendously since Congress enacted the law. In January 1799, Harrison Otis proposed on behalf of the Committee for Defense a review and strengthening of the act. John Williams of New York wanted a stronger resolution. "Too many insults of this kind had been suffered," argued Williams, "it is time for this nation to set their face against their commission."<sup>54</sup>

A committee was formed to explore making the Seamen's Act stronger. A few weeks later the committee presented "An Act to Revive, Continue, and Amend the Seamen's Act."<sup>55</sup>

The changes to the original were minimal; they mostly pertained to more regular reports from the Secretary of State regarding the number of protections issued by customs collectors and the number of relief applicants. In the revised legislation, however, the requirement that seamen obtain their protections solely from United States custom collectors was dropped.<sup>56</sup> American seamen obtained certificates from a number of sources – most commonly American consuls, but also random persons like city mayors or State Department officials – which caused difficulties with British officials. Congress's

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<sup>54</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 5<sup>th</sup> Congress, 3<sup>rd</sup> session, 2546, 2554-56, quote 2555.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 2754.

<sup>56</sup> "An Act to Revive and Continue in Force, Certain Parts of the 'An Act for the Relief and Protection of American Seamen,' and to Amend the same," Chapter XLI, 5<sup>th</sup> Congress, 3<sup>rd</sup> session, *Statutes at Large of the United States of American, 1789-1873* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1845), 1:731-32.

solution was to eliminate the article of the law that specified which US officials could issue protections. The amended Seamen's Act passed the House unanimously and faced no opposition in the Senate.<sup>57</sup>

While Congress attempted to legislate a solution to British press gangs, John Adams' administration tried to negotiate a settlement. Not only senators and representatives felt pressure from their constituents to find a solution to the abduction of American seamen. The executive branch certainly recognized the American public's frustration. After all, the majority of petitions and protests descended on the State Department. Adams adopted a pragmatic approach – an agreement for the mutual restitution of deserters. Such an arrangement could not end impressment, but because abductions allegedly stemmed from the Royal Navy's need to recover absconded seamen, it stood to reason that mutual restoration would curtail the practice. The Royal Navy had no need to remove seamen from American ships if assured that no British deserters were permitted on United States' vessels.

Timothy Pickering, Adams' Secretary of State, made the first effort at brokering a deal in the summer of 1797. Pickering informed Robert Liston, the British Minister to the United States, that deserter restitution was a possibility. Liston quickly informed Lord Grenville, the British Foreign Secretary, of American willingness to negotiate. Grenville drew up a convention that called for the delivery of any naval or military

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<sup>57</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 5<sup>th</sup> Cong., 3<sup>rd</sup> sess., 3017.

deserter from one nation to the other, but written in the *projet*<sup>58</sup> was an explicit exemption for impressment:

This stipulation is not to extend to authorize either of the parties to demand the delivery of any sailors Subjects or Citizens belonging to the other party, and who have in time of War or threatened hostility voluntarily entered into the service of their own Sovereign or Nation, or have been compelled to enter therein according to the Laws and practice prevailing in the two countries respectively.<sup>59</sup>

Grenville's attempt to exempt pressed seamen from the pact defeated the purpose of Pickering's suggesting mutual restitution in the first place. The American secretary let Liston know that any such clause rendered an agreement impossible.<sup>60</sup> The Adams administration was not prepared to abandon diplomacy, however. For the remainder of Adams' presidency (and for the first two years of Jefferson's) the American minister to Great Britain, Rufus King, headed all attempts to negotiate an end to impressment. He nearly succeeded.

George Washington named Rufus King minister to Great Britain in 1796. King took an immediate interest in the plight of abducted American seamen. King explained to Pickering that the importance of resolving the impressment controversy "is much greater than I had supposed it: instead of a few, and in those instances equivocal, cases I

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<sup>58</sup> *Projet* is a term that was common in diplomatic history, but has fallen out of usage. It means a draft of a proposed treaty. Although the term is antiquated, I have decided to use it in lieu of the more popular project, because I feel *projet* more accurately describes the progress of impressment negotiations, which always stalled at the draft phase.

<sup>59</sup> Gerard Clarfield, "Postscript to the Jay Treaty: Timothy Pickering and Anglo-American Relations, 1795-97," *William and Mary Quarterly* (Jan. 1966) vol. 23., no. 1, 110-18; Perkins, *First Rapprochement*, 65-9.

<sup>60</sup> *ASP: FR*, 3:577-81, block quote 577. These pages include Pickering's full response to Grenville's offer, as well as the opinion of other members of Adams' Cabinet regarding an appropriate settlement on impressment. Neither the secretaries of war or treasury, nor the Attorney General believed Grenville's *projet* satisfied American needs.

have, since the month of July past, made application for discharge, from British men of war, of two hundred and seventy-one seamen.” Although King had heard stories about most impressed seamen actually being British subjects, they did not leave him convinced. “It is certain that some of those who applied to me are not American citizens, but the exceptions are in my opinion few, and the evidence, exclusive of certificates, has been such . . . to satisfy me that the applicants were real Americans.”<sup>61</sup> King believed that finding a solution to impressment was vital to maintaining good relations between the United States and Great Britain. “I cannot express to your lordship, in language too strong,” King explained to Lord Grenville, “my thorough conviction of the importance of this subject to the mutual harmonies of the two countries.”<sup>62</sup>

King initially tried an indirect approach to Britain’s coercive recruiting in a manner similar to Pickering’s proposed deserter restoration. The American minister expended considerable effort discussing with Grenville issues tangential to impressment – the legality of consular protection certificates, in particular. King hoped to win British consent on the acceptability of consular certificates and thereby ease the predicament of American seamen. King received explicit instructions from Pickering to pursue a direct settlement on impressment, however, after the removal of five crew members from the *USS Baltimore*.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Rufus King to Timothy Pickering, 10 December 1796, *The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King: Compromising His Letters, Private and Official, His Public Documents, and His Speeches*, vol. 2, ed. Charles King (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1895), 416.

<sup>62</sup> King to Lord Grenville, 26 March 1797, *ASP: FR*, 2: 148.

<sup>63</sup> King to Pickering, 15 March 1799, *ASP: FR*, 3:583.

In November 1798, HMS *Carnatic* stopped the USS *Baltimore* and impressed five seamen off the American sloop.<sup>64</sup> The episode is discussed more fully in the next chapter, but the general reaction from Americans was one of outrage. John Adams elected to use the incident as leverage in negotiating an end to impressment. The President instructed Pickering: “Encourage Mr. King . . . to persevere . . . in denying the right of British men-of-war to take from our ships of war any men whatever, and from our merchant vessels any Americans, foreigners, or even Englishmen.” Adams was a longtime opponent of Royal Navy press ganging. He betrayed greater sympathy for Republican arguments against the practice than he did for Federalist excuses for British transgressions. “There is no principle under heaven,” Adams asserted, “by which they can justify taking by force, even from an American merchant vessel, even a deserter from their army or navy, much less private seamen.”<sup>65</sup>

King seized the initiative after learning of the *Baltimore* affair and approached Lord Grenville about reaching an accommodation on impressment. Grenville demurred. “Lord Grenville states no precise principle upon which he supposed this practice could be justified,” King reported, “and the conversation upon this point, like so many others upon the same subject, ended without a prospect of satisfaction.”<sup>66</sup> Throughout the remainder of 1799 and 1800, the British foreign secretary ignored any communication from Rufus King which attempted negotiations on the abduction of American seamen.

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<sup>64</sup> Michael Palmer, *Stoddert's War: Naval Operations During the Quasi War with France, 1789-1801* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 60-65.

<sup>65</sup> John Adams to Timothy Pickering, 7 July 1799, *The Works of John Adams: Second President of the United States*, vol. 8, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1853), 825.

<sup>66</sup> King to Pickering, 15 March 1799, *ASP: FR*, 3:583.

Adams hoped that Pickering may be able to make progress with Robert Liston in Philadelphia on the issue of mutual restoration, since King's talks in London had reached a dead end. Liston opened the discussion by presenting the same rejected *projet* from two years earlier. Once more Pickering discarded the British convention, and offered a counter-proposal which protected American vessels, on the high seas, from Royal Navy pressing. The American proposal stated, "nothing in these stipulations shall be construed to empower the civil, military or naval officers of either of the contracting parties forcibly to enter into the territory, forts, posts, or vessels of the other party, or to use violence to the persons of the commanders or other officers . . . with a view to compel the delivery of such persons as shall desert."<sup>67</sup> The British were not keen on an agreement that forbade impressment. The Americans were opposed to any proposal that protected the practice. The Pickering-Liston project died.

A shakeup in the last year of the Adams administration resulted in John Marshall replacing Pickering as secretary of state. Marshall took a much sterner view of impressment than his predecessor and did not accept any British legal justifications. He sent strict instructions to King about how to proceed in negotiations: "The practice of depredating on our commerce, and impressing our seamen, demands and must receive the most serious attention of the United States. The impressment of our seamen is an injury of very serious magnitude, which deeply affects the feelings and honor of the nation." Marshall handed King a daunting task. The secretary not only expected American and foreign seamen to be protected from the Royal Navy, but British subjects as well: "The case of British subjects, whether naturalized or not, is more questionable; but the right to

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<sup>67</sup> Pickering to Liston, 3 May 1800, *ibid.*, 578.

impress even them is denied.” Furthermore, Marshall argued that seamen serving aboard American ships were protected not just on the high seas, which had been Pickering’s argument, but also within British waters and harbors. Finally, Marshall urged King to threaten active recruitment of British seamen to serve in the US Navy if an agreement could not be reached.<sup>68</sup> Marshall’s ambition might have been laudable, but King knew that Grenville would not respond positively to such a hard line. Instead, King proposed a prohibition against the impressment of seamen from American vessels upon the high seas. Rufus King was not optimistic: “[It] is of the greatest importance and for that as well as other reasons will meet with the most difficulty.”<sup>69</sup>

Shortly after King sent his memorandum to Grenville, the William Pitt government lost power and all the principal ministers, including Grenville, resigned their posts. Grenville was replaced by Robert Jenkinson, Lord Hawkesbury, as Foreign Affairs Secretary. (Henry Addington replaced Pitt as Prime Minister and John Jervis, Lord St. Vincent, became the First Lord of the Admiralty.) There was also a change of leadership in the United States as Thomas Jefferson replaced John Adams as President. James Madison was named Jefferson’s secretary of state. Of the principal actors in the impressment negotiations, only Rufus King retained his role. Any progress King had made with Grenville (if he made any) was lost. The American minister immediately petitioned the new British government regarding impressment. “Lord Hawkesbury assures me that he will give to the several subjects which have been fully discussed, an early and impartial consideration,” reported King. “I am in hopes that Lord St. Vincent

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<sup>68</sup> John Marshall to King, 20 September 1800, *ASP: FR*, 2:487-88, quote 488.

<sup>69</sup> King to Lord Grenville, 19 December 1800, memorandum; King to Marshall, 23 January 1801, *Correspondence of King*, 3: 351, 375-77, quote 377.

will likewise be inclined to attend to our reiterated remonstrances against the impressment of our Seamen.”<sup>70</sup> King’s hopes were misplaced, however.

The American Minister wrote a long missive to Hawkesbury explaining the American position on impressment. King assured the British Secretary that the United States made every effort to employ only American seamen in their merchant vessels. He further expostulated that while the Royal Navy had the right within British waters to remove British seamen from American ships, that right did not extend to the high seas, and especially not to American waters. King believed it was imperative that some accord be reached banning impressment on the high-seas, otherwise the United States and Great Britain could not maintain friendly relations.<sup>71</sup>

Hawkesbury was open to King’s proposal. He approached Lord St. Vincent with the suggested moratorium. Meanwhile, King appealed to Thomas Erskine (a prominent English lawyer and known American sympathizer) to use his influence with St. Vincent to win the First Lord’s approval. “This proposition is now before your Government; the opinion of Lord St. Vincent will probably be decisive in respect to its adoption” King explained to Erskine. “I am, I confess, very desirous to engage your influence in our favor.”<sup>72</sup> Erskine agreed that the American proposal was reasonable, but he failed to convince St. Vincent.

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<sup>70</sup> King to Secretary of State, 25 February 1801, *Correspondence of King*, 3:396; Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen*, 85-90.

<sup>71</sup> King to Lord Hawkesbury, 9 March 1801, *ASP: FR* 2:493.

<sup>72</sup> King to Thomas Erskine, 11 March 1801, *Correspondence of King*, 3: 401-02.

The first lord vacillated. Initially, he rejected King's proposal because he believed too many American consuls granted protections to British subjects and too many American ship masters knowingly employed British seamen. Banning of impressment on the high seas would turn the American merchant service into a safe haven for any British sailor wishing to escape duty in the Royal Navy.<sup>73</sup> St. Vincent reversed course on the high seas ban over a month later, though, and informed King that he believed such an article was reasonable.

King attempted to reopen a discussion on impressment, but the planned negotiations between King, Hawkesbury and St. Vincent were retarded by two different events. First, George III was seriously ill for much of 1801, which brought the British government to a standstill – at least as far as it concerned Hawkesbury and St. Vincent's willingness to negotiate. After the monarch recovered, Great Britain and France signed the Treaty of Amiens, ending the War of the Second Coalition. Since the war was over, Rufus King explained "the warrants and orders to impress Seamen have been recalled, we may expect the discontinuance of farther applications from American Seamen." Because there was no longer a standing order to press able seamen, King saw no need to continue negotiating and he turned to settling other outstanding differences between the two nations.<sup>74</sup>

By the summer of 1802, Rufus King had served as America's minister to Great Britain for six years. He was ready to return to the United States. King informed

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<sup>73</sup> Erskine to King, 12 March 1801; Lord St. Vincent to Erskine, 13 March 1801, *Correspondence of King*, 3: 403-10.

<sup>74</sup> King to James Madison, 30 April 1802, *The Papers of James Madison, Secretary of State Series*, vol. 3, ed. J.C.A. Stagg (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1995), 168-69; Perkins, *First Rapprochement*, 154-56.

Madison that he planned to leave London in the spring of 1803. Early in 1803, however, King perceived that the peace of Amiens was crumbling. He approached Hawkesbury about impressment once more, hoping to place Anglo-American diplomacy on the best possible footing prior to leaving, and before Europe slid back into war.

King presented Hawkesbury with a drafted measure similar to the previous proposal that banned impressment on the high seas. Once again, Hawkesbury agreed and encouraged King to meet with St. Vincent. Once again, the first lord was hesitant to confer. King made clear the potentially serious repercussions of a renewal in the impressment of American citizens. St. Vincent agreed that such an article may be possible if the Royal Navy retained the right to search outbound vessels for British subjects. Encouraged by St. Vincent's promise to give the matter full consideration, King penned an official treaty.<sup>75</sup> It was a basic agreement, which consisted of three articles:

Article 1: No seaman nor seafaring person shall, upon the high seas and without the jurisdiction of either party, be demanded or taken out of any vessel belonging to the citizens or subjects of one of the parties, by the public or private armed vessels or men of war belonging to, or in the navy of the other party; and strict orders shall be given for the due observance of this engagement.

Article 2: Each party will prohibit its citizens or subjects from clandestinely concealing or carrying away from the territories or colonial possessions of the other, any seamen belonging to such other ports.

Article 3: These regulations shall be in force for five years and no longer.<sup>76</sup>

Lord St. Vincent agreed to the convention. King had achieved a settlement with Great Britain to stop impressment on the high seas. After King signed the draft, however, St. Vincent informed him that, upon further consideration, the treaty was only acceptable

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<sup>75</sup> Rufus King Memorandum Book, 12-15 May 1803, *Correspondence of King*, 4:254-57.

<sup>76</sup> King to Madison, July 1803, *ASP: FR*, 2:503.

if there was an exemption for the Narrow Seas (i.e., the waters separating England from the European continent and Ireland). King could not agree to any such exclusion and was forced to abandon the agreement. He justified his decision in his final report to Madison: “I regret not having been able to put this business on a satisfactory footing. . . . I have not misjudged the interests of our own country, in refusing to sanction a principle that might be productive of more extensive evils than those it was our aim to prevent.”<sup>77</sup>

Rufus King was undoubtedly crestfallen with the conclusion of his mission. He spent nearly seven years in London making a concerted effort to limit impressment. King lamented to his friend Erskine: “We have repeatedly offered to agree in any practical way which could be devised upon measures to discriminate American from British seamen.”<sup>78</sup> The British were not prepared to accept any negotiated settlement, however. Whether it was Timothy Pickering attempting a back-door agreement on impressment through the mutual restoration of deserters, or King trying to ban impressment on the high seas, British ministers found fault in every American *projet*. What is clear, however, is that the Federalist approach to impressment under John Adams transitioned smoothly into the Republican efforts to contain British aggression led by Thomas Jefferson. Rufus King’s continuation as Minister to England for two years after Jefferson became President had much to do with that continuity. His top priority remained impressment during that time, as it was during the last year of Adams’ leadership. Although Federalists in Congress presented the greatest resistance towards legislation aimed at stopping impressment,

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<sup>77</sup> King to Madison, July 1803, *ASP: FR*, 504; Edward Hale Brush, *Rufus King and His Times* (New York: Nicholas L. Brown, 1926), 68-72; Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen*, 95-96; Perkins, *First Rapprochement*, 154-56.

<sup>78</sup> King to Erskine, 11 March 1801, *Correspondence of King*, 3:401-02.

many Federalist leaders – including Adams, Marshall, and King – were as eager to bring the practice to a halt as their Republican successors.

Jefferson and Madison hoped to capitalize on King's near triumph with St. Vincent and continued negotiations after the Minister's resignation. The diplomatic attempts of the Jefferson administration accomplished nothing. The poor relationship that developed between James Madison and British minister Anthony Merry halted any negotiations in Washington. James Monroe and William Pinkney approached the same pinnacle of success as Rufus King, but like King, diplomatic efforts in London were fruitless. The Republican-led Congress passed various legislation aimed at better protecting American seamen and discussed some radical proposals to punish the British for their coercive recruiting. None of the congressional efforts yielded results.

Congress attempted to address the problem through legal measures. Unlike negotiating a treaty, which required the willing participation of Great Britain, the national legislature could pass laws and regulations aimed at preventing impressment and providing better security for American seamen. The first effort of the Republican-controlled Congress was an "Act for the Consuls and Vice-Consuls and the further protection of American seamen." House members, led by Samuel Smith, hoped to assuage British concerns about protection fraud by requiring merchant captains to carry certified crew lists. The lists were to provide the names and birthplaces of each crew member so that an individual seaman's protection could be checked against the crew list, should a press crew board the merchantman. Regulations were put in place against avaricious merchant captains who discharged their entire crews in foreign ports, then hired all new sailors at a cheaper rate. Under the new law, consuls were required to find

passage back to the United States for any stranded or distressed American seamen. American merchant captains were required to either hire said tars or take them on as super cargo. Finally, in hopes of appeasing British cries of fraud, any consul or vice consul who knowingly issued an American protection to a foreign seaman faced a fine of \$1000 and loss of title.<sup>79</sup>

In the same session, Congress also passed “An Act to provide additional armament for the protection of the seamen and commerce of the United States.” The act authorized the President to commission four sixteen gun sloops-of-war to strengthen the American presence in the Mediterranean (a measure aimed more at the Barbary pirates than Royal Navy) and fifteen gunboats to provide better security in American harbors.<sup>80</sup> The latter in particular was aimed at deterring Royal Navy molestation of American merchantmen. Both pieces legislation enjoyed considerable support. They aroused little debate in either the House or the Senate regarding the resolutions. By the end of February 1803, the acts were promulgated.

The passage of time showed that, unfortunately, the congressional measures went largely for naught.

The Royal Navy took no interest in certified crew lists, which were treated as contemptuously as American protections. The penalties established to discourage the issuing of fraudulent protections did not stop British officials’ perception, or at least their

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<sup>79</sup> “An Act Supplementary to the ‘An Act Concerning Consuls and Vice-Consuls, and for the Further Protection of American Seamen,” Chapter IX, 7<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., *Stats at Large*, 2:203-05; *Annals in Congress*, 7<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 280, 414.

<sup>80</sup> “An Act to Provide Additional Armament for the Protection of the Seamen and Commerce of the United States,” Chapter XI, 7<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., *Stats at Large*, 206; *Annals of Congress*, 7<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 507.

insistence, that American seamen protections could not be trusted.<sup>81</sup> Even the provisions aimed at getting stranded seamen back to the United States (and thereby lessen the chance of being pressed into foreign service) encountered difficulty. Many merchant captains found ways to avoid taking on extra hands or bringing the distressed tars aboard as super cargo. The authorization to bring fifteen gunboats into harbor service did not intimidate in any way the world's most powerful navy and impressments in American waters continued unabated.

The Eighth Congress took a different approach to the problem. Republican House leaders (in this case Jacob Crowninshield and Joseph Nicholson) created a bill that punished Royal Navy officers and seamen for disturbing the peace in American waters. "An Act for the Preservation of Peace in American Ports and Harbors" made foreign aggression answerable to American law. The regulations were necessitated by the Royal Navy's increased antagonism in American waters. HMS *Cambrian* and *Leander*, stationed outside New York harbor, were the most grievous offenders of United States territorial sovereignty. Both vessels stopped and search numerous American merchantmen, believing Joseph Bonaparte was aboard an outbound ship. The two British men-of-war also impressed many seamen during the summer of 1804.<sup>82</sup> Crowninshield explained to Jefferson that his constituents wanted something done: "The conduct of the English Frigate *Cambria* [*sic*] in impressing men within our own jurisdiction . . . is considered here [Salem, Massachusetts] as a very daring infringement of our rights, and

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<sup>81</sup> For an example of the disregard shown for these new American laws see, George Erving to James Madison, 17 November 1804, *PJM*, *SSS*, 8:301-2.

<sup>82</sup> For specific complaints see, Madison to Anthony Merry, 7 July 1804; Madison to Merry, 23 July 1804, *PJM*, *SSS*, 426-8, 505-6. Reginald Horsman, *The Causes of the War of 1812* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Co., 1962), 29, 51; Perkins, *First Rapprochement*, 243.

all parties seem to hope that it will be properly noticed.” In the estimation of the Massachusetts representative, “It is bad enough to impress our seamen at sea . . . but surely if the British public ships can with this go on, they might soon be hardy enough (as in Portuguese) to send press gangs into our streets and seize the Citizen as he passes to his daily occupation.”<sup>83</sup>

Once the Eighth Congress convened for its second session, it did not take long for Crowninshield and Nicholson to spring into action. Within three weeks, Nicholson presented his initial draft of a bill. The first provision decreed that any act of treason, felony, misdemeanor, disturbance of the peace, or violation of revenue laws were committed in American jurisdiction, foreign armed vessels could provide no safe haven for the accused. Local marshals received authorization to board any foreign armed vessel and apprehend the offending party. The marshal could raise a posse consisting of local militia and any regular U.S. Army or Navy forces in the area, for cases in which he anticipated violent resistance. The marshal was to demand surrender before resorting to force, but need not fear the consequence of aggressive action. “If death ensue to the person ordered to be arrested,” the bill read, “or to any of those giving him aid and countenance, it shall be justified.” If, however, the marshal or a member of the posse was killed by “the persons engaged in resisting the civil authority,” it was deemed homicide. Subsequent provisions allowed for a \$5,000 fine for any militia or military official who refused to aid a marshal, authorization for the President to expel any foreign vessel from American waters – forcibly, if necessary, and denial of entrance into American ports for

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<sup>83</sup> Jacob Crowninshield to Thomas Jefferson, letter, 14 July 1804, Crowninshield Family Papers, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, MA.

any foreign naval officer who trespassed upon American vessels on the high seas.<sup>84</sup> It was the most radical proposal yet made in the House of Representative relative to the impressment issue.

Crowninshield strongly supported the bill. He argued that it was time for action and asked his fellow representatives, “Will the US tamely submit to see some of its best citizens torn from their families and friends without attempting something for their relief?”<sup>85</sup> Virginia’s John Randolph was equally vehement: “[I] would like to see armed vessels employed in disturbing our peaceable commerce blown out of the water . . . to suffer insult to be added to injury, is indeed a degradation of national honor, and ought never to be borne with, let it come from any nation whatever.” There was some opposition from the Federalists, especially Connecticut’s Roger Griswold, but the objections were based more on form than spirit. Griswold questioned if Congress had the constitutional power to allow local authorities greater jurisdiction in American territorial waters. There was also considerable debate over whether the killing of a marshal or a member of his posse should be ruled homicide or manslaughter.<sup>86</sup> Overall, the bill met little resistance in the House, though, and on the third reading, it passed and was sent to the Senate, which approved it on the last day of the session.

The Preservation of Peace Act was the last non-economic bill Congress passed in an effort to halt impressment. Although Samuel Smith, Maryland’s champion for

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<sup>84</sup> “An Act for the More Effective Preservation of Peace in the Ports and Harbors of the United States, and in the Waters Under Their Jurisdiction,” Chapter XLI, 8<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., *Stats at Large*, 2:339-42, quote 340.

<sup>85</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 8<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1006.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 762-76, quote 769-70.

American seamen, did introduce radical legislation in both the Senate and the House (in 1805 and 1811, respectively) that offered a cash bounty for killing a press gang member, most congressmen felt that such retaliatory measures went too far. Like the other legislation pushed through Congress, however, the Peace Act did nothing to slow or stop British aggression. Impressment continued in American waters, and if anything, Royal Navy captains grew bolder, evinced by the death of John Pierce and the attack on the USS *Chesapeake*. The only article of the Peace Act that proved mildly effective was the presidential expulsion power, which Jefferson used multiple times.

Republican congressional leaders changed tactics in 1806 and attempted to win concessions from the British by targeting their trade. Other congressional efforts to regulate impressment had failed, and many representatives were honest about the pressure they faced from their constituents. Pennsylvania's Andrew Gregg introduced the resolution calling for a full non-importation of British goods. Impressment, Gregg explained, "has produced a loud expression of public indignation, which it is our duty to echo." He believed that cutting off British merchants from the American market would have the desired effect.<sup>87</sup>

Gregg found considerable support for his proposal. James Sloan likewise believed that Congress had an obligation to the American people to find a solution to British transgressions – impressment, in particular. "Are not the people calling on us from every part of the Union?" Sloan asked. When Joseph Nicholson called for only a more moderate non-importation measure, Sloan asked, "Is this giving immediate

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<sup>87</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 9<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, 335.

attention to the sufferings of our constituents?”<sup>88</sup> Instead of limited non-importation, Sloan suggested full non-intercourse, to be withdrawn once the Royal Navy released every captive American seaman. Jacob Crowninshield wrote to his brother-in-law about the rising expectations Congress faced as it strove to find an answer to impressment: “We are compelled by the loud calls which pour in upon us to take a decided stand against British aggression.”<sup>89</sup> Not every representative, however, felt that economic coercion was the answer.

The nation’s representatives debated the merits of non-importation, non-intercourse, and limited non-importation for three weeks. Virginia’s John Randolph was the leading opponent of these measures. He condemned the proposals as war measures in disguise. Randolph offered no solution of his own, but felt that non-importation and non-intercourse could lead to nothing but war. Other opponents of the measures rejected them because of the negative impact on the American economy, or that they were really intended to benefit American merchants and not American seamen, or that the trade resolutions indirectly aided Napoleon’s war effort and thereby violated American neutrality.<sup>90</sup> Little was said by the resolutions’ detractors about impressment other than to lament its continuance and wish for an effective remedy. The supporters of trade restriction, though, believed it could be the necessary tonic to help captive sailors. Barnabas Bidwell became incensed when men professed to be anxious over Britain’s confinement of American citizens, but opted to do nothing than pass a bill they thought would prove ineffective. Among the many speeches made in the prolonged debate over

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 449-51, 458-60.

<sup>89</sup> Crowninshield to Nathaniel Silsbee, 29 January 1806, Crowninshield Family Papers.

<sup>90</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 9<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 538-614.

economic coercion, Bidwell's impassioned defense of American seamen stands out – in part because he worried that some representatives took no action on the sailors' behalf because of their socio-economic status.

Gentlemen, I am afraid, have imbibed unreasonable prejudices against our seamen. Some of them, undoubtedly, are profligates and renegades . . . in general, our sailors are a hardy, honest, brave, generous, though improvident race of men. Many of them are young men from respectable families, in the seaports and inland towns. Others have families of their own, as dependent on them and as dear to them, as ours are to us. It is true, they are not generally opulent. If they were, they would be above the necessity of venturing on the stormy element for a livelihood. It is admitting that they are poor, but is their poverty a sufficient reason for putting them out of the national guardianship? Their occupation is indeed, a humble, a hazardous one; but it is as lawful and honest a one as the farmer in his field or the mechanic in his shop. They are our fellow citizens and have as fair a claim for public protection as we ourselves can have.<sup>91</sup>

In the final calculation, there was simply not enough support for either Gregg or Sloan's resolutions. The House voted overwhelmingly in favor of Nicholson's limited non-importation, and Gregg and Sloan withdrew their proposals in deference to the preferred, weaker bill. It took the House another week to agree on which articles should be included in the limited non-importation. Nicholson stipulated that the only banned items should be ones the United States could either produce independently or import from another nation. Eventually Congress agreed to include leather, silk, hemp, flax, brass, and tin, as well as fine woolens, glass, ready-made clothing, hats, nail, pictures, nails, beer and ale. Congress also postponed its start date until November 15, 1806 – more than six months after the passage of the bill.<sup>92</sup> Interestingly, John Randolph condemned this milder version of non-importation as “a milk-and-water bill” and too

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<sup>91</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 9<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 658-9.

<sup>92</sup> “An Act to Prohibit the Importation of Certain Goods, Wares, and Merchandise,” Chapter XXIX, 9<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., *Stats at Large*, 2:379.

meeke to accomplish anything. Still, the limited non-importation bill passed the House decidedly, 93-32, and the Senate 19-9.<sup>93</sup>

John Randolph was prescient. Such narrow trade restrictions accomplished little. Eventually, the Federal government drastically expanded its efforts at economic coercion, which Jeffersonians believed in as an effective bargaining instrument. The Embargo dominated the end of Thomas Jefferson's second term. Madison's first four years in office witnessed various combinations of non-importation and non-intercourse. The purpose of all these measures was the same; to force concessions from Great Britain on impressment and (under Madison) the Orders in Council. The Republican coercive measures failed to accomplish that goal. What motivated Jefferson and Madison to turn to trade restrictions in 1807 was the same thing that pushed Congress to try non-importation in 1806 – desperation. Congressional leaders felt that all other legislative efforts to check British aggression had failed, and in the wake of the *Chesapeake* affair, Jefferson and Madison reached the same conclusion regarding diplomacy.

Jefferson and Madison attempted multiple diplomatic settlements concurrent to the legislative efforts of Congress. In 1803, with the peace of Amiens in shambles and the number of pressed seamen rising, Madison penned messages to James Monroe of the mounting pressure on the administration to find a solution: “The public mind is rising to a state of high sensibility” and “forbearance will proceed merely from a hope that a remedy to the evil is contemplated by negotiation.”<sup>94</sup> Despite the urgency of the situation, neither Jefferson nor Madison felt optimistic that an agreement could be successfully

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<sup>93</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 9<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 232, 878.

<sup>94</sup> Madison to Monroe, 26 December 1803, *PJM*, SSS, 6:213

concluded. Jefferson complained to his secretary of state about the failure to secure an anti-impressment treaty with Great Britain. The President called the practice, “an afflicting subject.” He explained, “With every disposition to render them [the British] all justifiable services, I fear they will put our patience to the proof.”<sup>95</sup> Meanwhile, Madison lamented; “The British government will not act with us on the subject of seamen. . . . They would sign no convention without reserving to themselves the claim to impress seamen in the narrow seas. . . . It is no doubt made a condition with a view to prevent any agreement, and to carry on impressments as heretofore.”<sup>96</sup> Despite the Republican leaders’ frustration, King’s near success in the spring of 1803, along with the optimistic reports James Monroe sent from London, and the public pressure Madison mentioned, motivated Jefferson and Madison to continually push for a settlement. Unfortunately, a series of set-backs retarded diplomatic progress.

Between April and December 1803, no American minister resided in London (Monroe was in France helping negotiate the Louisiana Purchase). Likewise, there was no British minister in Washington from the spring of 1800 until early spring 1804. When Anthony Merry finally arrived in the United States, his relationship with the Jefferson administration quickly soured. The tension with Merry began over perceived breeches in etiquette by President Jefferson (which Merry took as a personal affront), worsened over Merry’s discomfort with slavery, and grew so severe that Madison could make no progress on any of the differences between the United States and Great Britain. Eventually, Madison instructed Monroe to carry out all of the United States’ official

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<sup>95</sup> Jefferson to Madison, 16 August 1803, *ibid.*, 5:314.

<sup>96</sup> Madison to Jefferson, 28 August 1803, *ibid.*, 5:352.

correspondence with Great Britain, since speaking with Merry had become an exercise in futility.<sup>97</sup>

Across the Atlantic, James Monroe received a warm reception when he finally arrived in London in the fall of 1803. Foreign Secretary Lord Hawkesbury encouraged Monroe's belief that a convention with Great Britain was not just possible, but likely. Political instability in Great Britain made any serious negotiations impossible, though. The Addington Ministry collapsed within a few months of Monroe's arrival. The Pitt Ministry became the governing power, once again. Lord Harrowby became Pitt's Foreign Secretary, and he held a dour view toward the United States. Monroe attempted to convince Harrowby of the seriousness of resolving impressment. In one their more fruitful conversations, Monroe pleaded: "The practice of impressing our men, which had been carried to great excess was a cause of continual and high irritation throughout the union."<sup>98</sup> Unfortunately, Harrowby served as foreign secretary for only seven months before he was replaced by Lord Mulgrave. Mulgrave proved less receptive than Harrowby, leading Monroe to conclude, "No disposition has been shown to prescribe by treaty, any restraint on the impressment of our seamen."<sup>99</sup> A year after Mulgrave became foreign secretary, William Pitt died and the power in the British government shifted yet

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<sup>97</sup> Madison to Rufus King, 18 December 1803, Merry to Madison, 4 & 11 May 1804, *PJM*, SSS, 7: 150-52, 205-07; Madison to James Monroe, 12 September 1804, *PJM*, SSS, 8:35-36. For more on the problems that arose between Anthony Merry and the Jefferson administration, please see, Malcolm Lester, *Anthony Merry Redivivus: A Reappraisal of the British Minister to the United States, 1803-06* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1978), 34-8. The importance of the slavery issue has been overlooked as further deteriorating the relationship between the Jefferson administration and Anthony Merry. For a more favorable interpretation of Merry's mission to the United States see, Anthony Steel, "Anthony Merry and the Anglo-American Dispute About Impressment, 1803-6," *Cambridge Historical Journal*, vol. 9, no. 3, 331-51.

<sup>98</sup> Monroe to Madison, 8 September 1804, *PJM*, SSS, 8: 25-30, quote 26.

<sup>99</sup> Monroe to Madison, 18 October 1805, *ASP: FR*, 3:107

again. Lord Grenville became the new Prime Minister at the head of the Ministry of All Talents. Such rapid change in Britain's political leadership left Monroe powerless to carry out his mission. He reported to Madison: "You will readily perceive that in this state of things I have been able to make no progress in the business depending with this government."<sup>100</sup> Monroe's London mission was further disrupted by a trip to Spain, delaying negotiations with Britain even longer. In all, more than two years passed between Monroe's arrival and when the American Minister was able to conduct earnest negotiations with the British government.<sup>101</sup>

The Jefferson administration remained committed to reaching a convention. Jefferson named William Pinkney Minister Extraordinaire to aid Monroe in the negotiations. Pinkney was a well-rounded political figure. He served as a U.S. Representative for Maryland for one term, was the mayor of Annapolis for five years, and had been Maryland's attorney general. Although Pinkney was a Federalist, the Jefferson administration trusted him due to his previous work in helping to settle an outstanding debt owed to the state of Maryland by the Bank of England.<sup>102</sup>

Pinkney arrived in London on June 24, 1806. The instructions that he carried from Madison were explicit. Impressment ranked first among the grievances listed in his directive, and he explained: "The importance of an effectual remedy for this practice derives urgency from the licentiousness with which it is still pursued, and from the

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<sup>100</sup> Monroe to Madison, 3 May 1804, *PJM*, SSS, 7:104.

<sup>101</sup> Monroe to the Honorable Charles Fox, 25 February 1806, *The Writings of James Monroe, Including a Collection of His Public and Private Papers and Correspondence*, vol. 4, ed. Stanislaus M. Hamilton (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1900), 419 -21.

<sup>102</sup> Bradford Perkins, *Prologue to War: 1805-1812, England and the United States* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970), 115-17.

growing impatience of this country under it.” Madison went on to clarify that any revocation of non-importation depended on a satisfactory settlement to impressment.<sup>103</sup> Of course, impressment was not the only issue Monroe and Pinkney hoped to settle, but the emphasis they placed on seaman abductions, and the measures proposed for the restoration of deserters demonstrated their keen desire to end the practice.

Initially, Monroe and Pinkney were to negotiate principally with Charles James Fox, the current British foreign secretary. Fox openly sympathized with the United States. In the initial exchange of correspondence between Monroe and Fox, the former emphasized the urgency of untangling the Gordian knot of impressment. “The sensibility of the government, indeed of the whole nation, had been subjected to great and almost continual excitement by the abuses which had been committed in that line, on the high seas, in the islands, and sometimes in the ports of the United States.”<sup>104</sup> Fox, however, took ill (the malady eventually killed him three months later) and in his stead, Prime Minister Grenville appointed Lords Auckland and Holland commissioners – a process that took nearly two month. Finally, formal negotiations began on August 27, 1806.<sup>105</sup> The original draft treaty submitted by the American ministers was straightforward. The first article banned impressment on the high seas and made provisions for the liberation of any seamen already subjected to involuntary servitude. The second article provided for the restoration of British deserters, along with a pledge to help apprehend any seamen aboard American ships suspected of that offense. Several weeks into negotiations,

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<sup>103</sup> Madison to Monroe and William Pinkney, 15 May 1806, *ASP: FR*, 3:119-23.

<sup>104</sup> Monroe to the Honorable Charles Fox, 25 February 1806, *Writings of Monroe*, 4: 419.

<sup>105</sup> Monroe to Madison, 30 May 1806; Monroe and Pinkney to Madison, 25 July, 15 August, 11 September 1806, *ASP: FR*, 3:126, 128, 132-33.

Monroe reported that difficulties had arisen: “On the subject of impressment, it was soon apparent that they felt the strongest repugnance to a formal renunciation or abandonment of their claim to take from our vessels on the high seas such seamen as should appear to be their own subjects.”<sup>106</sup> The British commissioners instead urged that the United States, together with Great Britain, should adopt a more effective measure to identify American citizens. Auckland and Holland made it clear that their government did not believe United States authorities could prevent merchant ships from hiring British seamen. Any ban on impressment effectively turned the American merchant fleet into a floating asylum for deserters, in the Britons’ estimation. The American ministers, in turn, desired something more concrete than an identification program.<sup>107</sup>

Monroe and Pinkney made every effort to allay the concerns of their British counterparts. The American ministers revised their original convention to include a provision making it illegal for merchant captains to employ British deserters and promised the aid of the United States government in recovering any British seamen taken aboard an American vessel in a neutral port. When Auckland and Holland expressed anxiety that the term “deserter” was too limited and only required the United States to restore sailors fleeing from the Royal Navy, Monroe and Pinkney amended the language, so it included “seafaring persons who quit their service.” With these changes in place, Auckland and Holland recommended the *projet* to the British cabinet. The Lords of the

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<sup>106</sup> Monroe and Pinkney to Madison, 11 September 1806, *ASP: FR*, 3:133.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-5; Anthony Steel, “Impressment in the Monroe-Pinkney Negotiations, 1806-07,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 57, no. 2, 352-67; Donald R. Hickey, “The Monroe-Pinkney Treaty of 1806: A Reappraisal,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 1, 65-81.

Admiralty, together with the cabinet officers in the Doctors' Common, unanimously rejected the settlement.<sup>108</sup>

Monroe and Pinkney had spent months negotiating in good faith with the British commissioners. The American ministers repeatedly revised the draft treaty to assuage British concerns that ending impressment would convert the American merchant fleet into a floating asylum for deserters.<sup>109</sup> The result was that Auckland and Holland offered a counter-proposal to make it illegal for British officers to impress American seamen from American vessels. In return, the United States would make it criminal to issue protections to British subjects (which it was already.) In short, the British proposed to maintain the *status quo*. Monroe and Pinkney dismissed the British offer immediately. The four men had to decide whether or not negotiations should continue without an agreement on impressment. Auckland and Holland did not wish to leave affairs unsettled, and offered a compromise. Impressment would not constitute an article of the treaty and Great Britain would not disclaim the right of impressment. The British government would provide a note to the United States representing the official view of impressment and the United States.<sup>110</sup> The note read, in part:

That his Majesty's Government, animated by an earnest desire to remove every cause of dissatisfaction, has directed his Majesty's commissioners to give to Mr. Monroe and Mr. Pinkney the most positive assurance that instructions have been

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<sup>108</sup> Monroe and Pinkney to Madison, 11 September 1806, *ASP: FR*, 3:138-39.

<sup>109</sup> Historian James Zimmerman argued, "It is difficult to see how a more rigid plan returning deserters could have been devised," Zimmerman, *The Impressment of American Seamen*, 120; likewise, Bradford Perkins believed that the British missed an opportunity to strike the best possible arrangement on impressment and deserters by rejecting the original *projet* presented by Monroe and Pinkney, Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 130-31.

<sup>110</sup> Lords Auckland and Holland to Monroe and Pinkney, 8 November 1806; Monroe and Pinkney to Madison, *ASP: FR*, 3:139-40; Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 121-37; Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen*, 117-19.

given, and shall be repeated and enforced, for the observance of the greatest caution in the impressing of British seamen; and that the strictest care shall be taken to preserve the citizens of the United States from any molestation or injury, and that immediate and prompt redress shall be afforded upon any representation of injury sustained by them.

That the commissioners of the United States well know that no recent cause of complaint have occurred, and that no probable inconvenience can result from the postponement of an article subject to so many difficulties. Still, that his Majesty's Commissioners are instructed to secure the interests of both states, without injury to rights to which they are respectively attached.<sup>111</sup>

Monroe and Pinkney accepted the note. Monroe explained in his report to Madison that he and Pinkney agreed the United States had much to gain from the note, and little to lose. The note embodied all the wishes of Jefferson and Madison concerning impressment except for the express relinquishment of the practice. The American ministers believed the note to have been given with a "particular degree of solemnity and obligation" and that the pledge should "be held as obligatory on the Government, in its just import, as if the substance had been stipulated in a treaty."<sup>112</sup> The four negotiators, having reached an agreement on impressment, moved on to other differences between the two nations. The treaty was concluded on December 27, 1806, and on January 3, 1807, Monroe and Pinkney sent a copy to Washington.

If a more rapid form of communication had existed at the time, the treaty would never have been concluded. Monroe's November report explaining the acceptance of a note was received by Jefferson and Madison coldly. The president was displeased that his negotiators had abandoned a formal article on impressment. As he explained to Madison: "I believe the sine qua non we made is that of the nation, and that they would

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<sup>111</sup> Lords Auckland and Holland to Monroe and Pinkney, 8 November 1806, *ASP:FR*, 3:140.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 139; for further justifications from Monroe on his and Pinkney's conduct and their decision to accept the note on impressment in lieu of a formal article see, Monroe to Jefferson, 11 January 1807; Monroe to William Branch Giles, 30 April 1807, *Writings of Monroe*, 5:1-3, 5-7.

rather go without a treaty than with one which does not settle this article.”<sup>113</sup> Madison met the President’s with approbation. The secretary of state sent renewed instructions to London in early February 1807 informing them that their decision to accept an informal promise on impressment was unacceptable. He made clear that such a treaty was bound to be rejected. Madison explained to his ministers: “If, previous to the receipt of it [this letter], a treaty not including an article relating to impressment should have been concluded, and be on the way, the British commissioners should be candidly apprised of the reason for not expecting its ratification.”<sup>114</sup> Finally, Madison detailed the numerous flaws in the British note.

The claim that there had been no recent cause for complaint regarding impressment was erroneous. Between October 1 and December 31, 1806, 155 American seamen had filed new applications for relief through the London agent.<sup>115</sup> Meanwhile, Madison explained that, “In the American seas, including the West Indies, the impressments have, perhaps, at no time been more numerous or vexatious.” Additionally, the British plan as laid out in the note made Royal Navy officers the sole judge in determining the nationality of a seaman. There were no regulations put into operation that confined the aggression of the Royal Navy on the high seas. In Madison’s estimation, all the note amounted to was a repeated promise of greater care in recovering British seamen from American ships. “If the future instructions are to be repetitions of the past, we well know the inefficacy of them,” Madison quipped.<sup>116</sup> Madison

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<sup>113</sup> Jefferson to Madison, 1 February 1807, *The Republic of Letters*, 3: 1464

<sup>114</sup> Madison to Monroe and Pinkney, 3February 1807, *ASP: FR*, 3:154.

<sup>115</sup> “Abstract Returns, 1805-09,” RG 59, Entry 933, NACP.

encouraged Monroe and Pinkney to reopen negotiations with Auckland and Holland. The British, however, expressed no interest in beginning the process anew. The treaty arrived in Washington on March 15, 1807, and, as had been Jefferson's intention since early February, he refused to submit the agreement to the Senate.<sup>117</sup>

The failure of the Monroe-Pinkney Treaty (as it has come to be known), was a significant turning point in Anglo-American relations. It was the last concerted effort to find a diplomatic solution to the issues that plagued the United States and Great Britain. Just months after the joint refusal of the British commissioners to reopen talks and Jefferson to submit the treaty to Congress, HMS *Leopard* attacked the USS *Chesapeake*. Republican foreign policy changed accordingly. Diplomacy had failed and economic coercion became the method of choice for Jefferson and Madison to try and wring concessions out of Great Britain. Although Congress had previously attempted limited non-importation, Jefferson's Embargo signaled the major change in strategy.

On June 22, 1807, the British frigate HMS *Leopard* attacked the USS *Chesapeake* in the waters off Cape Henry, Virginia. The incident is examined closer in the next chapter, but the assault on an American public vessel, the death of four United States seamen, the wounding of seventeen others, and the reimpressionment of four men off the *Chesapeake* enflamed the passions of the American people to unprecedented heights. Jefferson knew that some form of reprisal was necessary.

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<sup>116</sup> Madison to Monroe and Pinkney, 3 February 1807, *ASP: FR* 3:154

<sup>117</sup> Hickey, "Monroe-Pinkney Treaty," 84-88; Horsman, *Causes of the War of 1812*, 91-94; Andrew Burstein and Nancy Isenberg, *Madison and Jefferson* (New York: Random House, 2010), 451-53.

There can be little doubt about the importance of impressment as a motivating factor in the Embargo. Following the attack on the *Chesapeake*, Jefferson struggled to find a course of action that both maintained the United States' honor, and avoided embroiling the nation in war. He clung to the hope that Great Britain would respond to the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair by disavowing impressment. Jefferson explained to Thomas Paine that such a concession on the part of Britain would go far in repairing Anglo-American relations. "If they would but settle the question of impressment from our bottoms, I should be well contented to drop all attempts at a treaty . . . commercial arrangements we can sufficiently provide by legislative regulations, but impressment has taken place only against us we shall be left to settle that for ourselves."<sup>118</sup> When the Portland ministry refused to conciliate Jefferson with a cessation of high-seas abductions, Jefferson was compelled to take a rigid, albeit risky stance and asked Congress for a full embargo. The President made it clear that one of the express purposes of ending all transatlantic trade was to protect American seamen from British abduction.

The great and increasing dangers with which our vessels, our seamen, and merchandise are threatened, on the high seas and elsewhere . . . and it being of the greatest importance to protect these essential resources, I deem it my duty to recommend the subject to the consideration of Congress . . . an inhibition of the departure of our vessels from the ports of the United States.<sup>119</sup>

Historians of the early republic often ignore the importance of impressment in the formulation of Jefferson's embargo policy. From Bradford Perkins to Andrew Berstein and Nancy Isenberg and many others in between, the emphasis is consistently on commerce and ideology. Undoubtedly, Republican aversion to armed conflict and belief

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<sup>118</sup> Jefferson to Thomas Paine, 9 October 1807, *Thomas Jefferson Papers*, Founders Online, National Archives, <http://founders.archives.gov>, last accessed 10 March 2015.

<sup>119</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 10<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1216.

in trade restriction as an alternative played an important role in Jefferson's strategy. Dismissing impressment, however, is folly. The Embargo was a response to the *Chesapeake* attack – an event rooted in impressment – and Jefferson's himself emphasized the importance of manstealing in not just Anglo-American relations, but in how he formulated his course of action regarding British aggression. Furthermore, the *Chesapeake* affair, and thus the Embargo, was the direct result of the diplomatic and legislative failure to end impressment. Despite numerous attempts by both the United States Congress and State Department to regulate the abduction of American seamen, British leaders refused to disavow the Royal Navy's alleged right to recover their seamen.

Jefferson's critics have argued that he used impressment as a pretense for quashing the Monroe-Pinkney Treaty. From Federalist Senator James Bayard to historian Anthony Steel, they reasoned that Jefferson did not want an agreement with Great Britain. He felt confident British commissioners would never agree to an article banning impressment, therefore he made such an article a *sine qua non*, and killed any chance for Monroe and Pinkney to negotiate a successful treaty.<sup>120</sup> Such thinking, however, ignores several key developments. First, the Jefferson administration was on the verge of an acceptable impressment measure twice; with Rufus King in 1803 and in the first phase of the Monroe-Pinkney negotiations. Lord St. Vincent killed the first arrangement and the British cabinet balked at the second. Neither Thomas Jefferson nor James Madison played a role in those rebuffs; they encouraged settlement and offered deserter restoration

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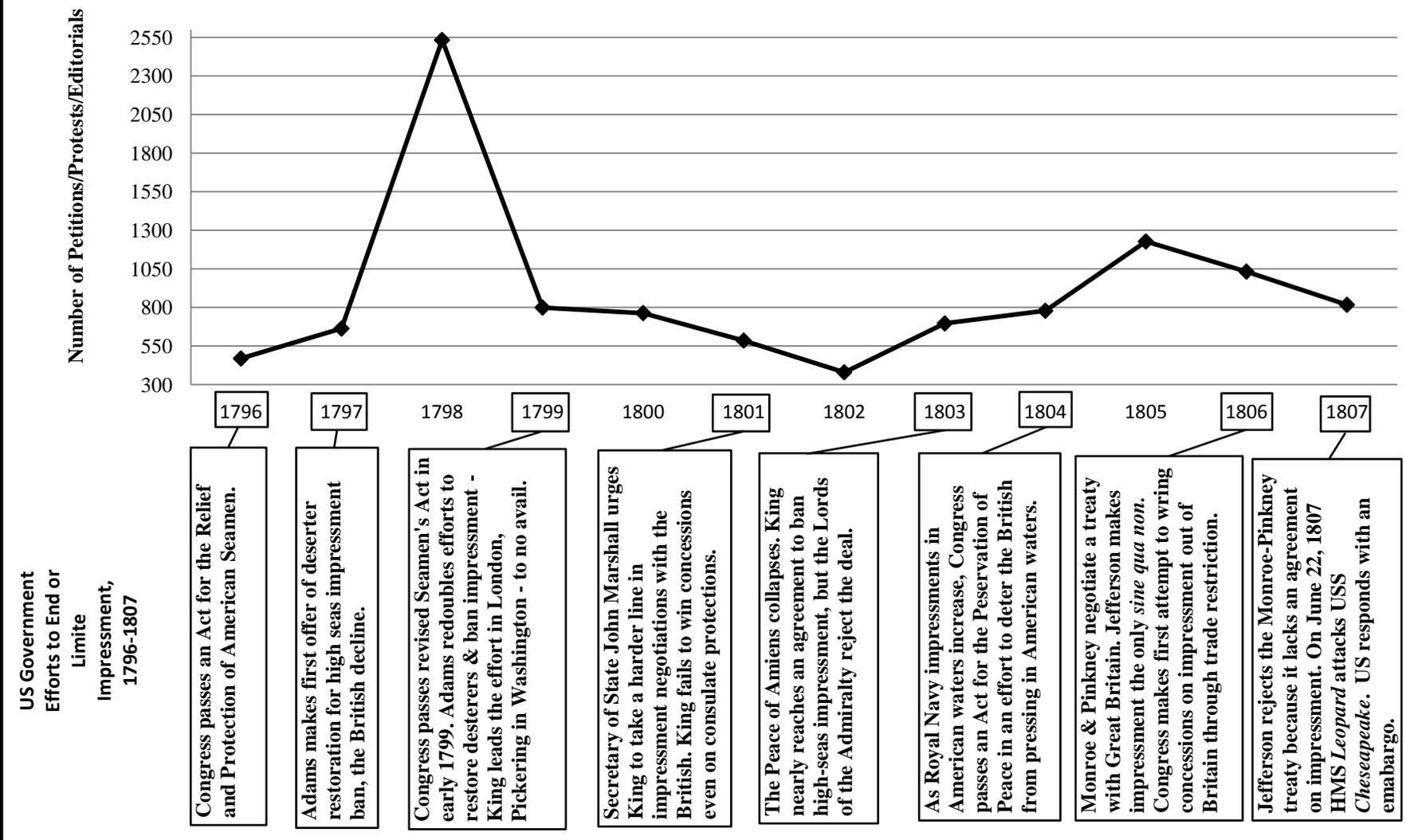
<sup>120</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 10<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 194-95; Steel, "Monroe-Pinkney Negotiations," 369; Perkins does not believe that Jefferson intended for the negotiations to fail from the start, but he does believe that Jefferson and Madison were too uncompromising on the issue of impressment, Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 138-39.

in return. Second, the American people's demand for a solution to impressment was sincere. The below table illustrates the symbiotic relationship between public protest and government initiative. [Table 8] Impressment was not a phantom problem created by Jefferson for political expediency. It was a consistent quandary in Anglo-American relations that required a positive solution. The president had every reason to believe that a treaty without an impressment article would be met with public condemnation. Jefferson and Madison witnessed, encouraged, and participated in the Jay Treaty protests, partially because of its silence on impressment; a decade later, with the aggressiveness of impressment at an apex, the Republican leaders could hardly afford to approve a new treaty that ignored the issue once more. Madison said as much in his final instructions to Monroe and Pinkney: "He [the President] cannot reconcile it with his duty to our seafaring citizens, or with the sensibility or sovereignty of the nation, to recognize even constructively, a principle that would expose on the high seas, their liberty, their lives, every thing in a word that is dearest to the human heart."<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Madison to Monroe and Pinkney, 20 May 1807, *APR, FR*, 3:166.

**Table 8: Public Protest Yearly, 1796-1807 with Corresponding Government Action**



**US Government Efforts to End or Limit Impressment, 1796-1807**

The *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair was the culmination of failed efforts to reach an agreement with Great Britain limiting the impressment of American seamen. Both the executive and legislative branches of the Federal government repeatedly tried to find a solution to what Representative William Findley called “by far the most aggravated grievance” the United States had against Great Britain.<sup>122</sup>

Congress passed a series of bills, beginning with the Seamen’s Act of 1796, aimed at providing better protection and sound evidence of American citizenship for the nation’s sailors. Likewise, the State Department, during both the Adams and Jefferson presidencies, hoped to find a diplomatic resolution that satisfied the United States’ desire to have its sovereignty respected, while calming British concerns that American merchant vessels were safe-havens for England’s more opportunistic tars. Jefferson was committed enough to reaching an agreement that he made a cessation of impressment that only required accord in a treaty with Great Britain. Jefferson stressed ending impressment, not out of a desire to scuttle negotiations, but because he knew that any peace without such an agreement would be fleeting. In the background of all these efforts was the clamoring of the American people. “The whole American people are alarmed, and their feelings excited by the reiterated acts of oppression and insult,” exclaimed New Jersey congressman Ebenezer Elmer.<sup>123</sup> None of the government’s efforts slowed British aggression – in fact, impressment worsened during the decade.

The continuity of American policy regarding impressment flies in the face of most accepted scholarship, which usually divides the phases into either a Federalist/Republican

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<sup>122</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 9<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 614.

<sup>123</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 9<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 631.

dichotomy or pre-Amiens/post-Amiens periods.<sup>124</sup> In actuality, the advent of major change in United States policy towards Great Britain was the attack on the USS *Chesapeake*. This blatant disregard for American sovereignty pushed United States foreign policy towards Great Britain in a new direction; away from diplomacy and, unwittingly, closer to war.

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<sup>124</sup> Bradford Perkins, *First Rapprochement and Prologue to War*, for example, uses Amiens as the division in his work on Anglo-American relations, as does Reginald Horsman, *Causes of the War of 1812*. Meanwhile, Zimmerman, *Impressment of American Seamen*, maintains the Federalist/Republican dichotomy, along with Scott Thomas Jackson, "Impressment and Anglo-American Discord, 1789-1818," and Claire Phelan, "In the Vice of Empire: British Impressment of the American Sailor," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Texas Christian University, 2008).

CHAPTER SIX:  
“WE MUST PLACE OURSELVES IN AN ATTITUDE FOR WAR.”  
CONFRONTATIONS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES’ AND ROYAL NAVIES  
OVER IMPRESSMENT, 1798-1812

Sir, we desire you will have the kindness to take us out of this ship for we are very much Against serving the British it is a Nation that we do not belong to we are all Americans and has no hopes of getting clear except you will befriend us we are all pertected with American Pertections But they will not look at them and moreover was Born and Brought up in the Unighted Stated in America and as we are in our own Cuntry we hope that the laws of the Unighted States will pertect us.<sup>1</sup>

Captain James Barron, United States Navy, received the above quoted letter on June 17, 1807. He was at Norfolk, aboard the USS *Chesapeake*, one of six American frigates. The letter was sent to Barron by seventeen seamen trapped aboard HMS *Belona*, anchored in Lynnhaven Bay at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay. Barron could do little to help the men. The *Chesapeake* was about to venture out onto the Atlantic in a few days. Barron did not have the time to investigate the veracity of the men’s claim. The captain passed the letter on to the Department of State. He was not unsympathetic to the plight of impressed seamen, though. In fact, Barron was harboring aboard his ship multiple Americans who had been taken by the British, deserted to the *Chesapeake*, and were actively being sought by the Royal Navy.

Barron was not the only US Navy officer to be sent such a letter. During the previous decade, Silas Talbot, William Bainbridge, Isaac Chauncey, John Rodgers, and likely others besides, were petitioned by captive seamen pleading for the Navy’s

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<sup>1</sup> John Holridge, et. al., to the Commander of the USS *Chesapeake*, 18 June 1807, John Holridge file, Records of Impressed Seamen, 1793 – 1815, Records of the Department of State, Record Grouping 59, Entry 928, National Archives and Records Administration II, College Park, Maryland.

intervention.<sup>2</sup> It was nearly impossible for an American warship to enter a British port in the Caribbean or the Mediterranean without a desperate sailor seeking help. For nearly fifteen years the US Navy bristled at the impudence of the Royal Navy as the latter wantonly seized thousands of American citizens.

United States Navy personnel were increasingly acrimonious to the British practice of impressment. The US Navy's growing hostility towards the Royal Navy played a vital role in blazing the path to war. Each incident of impressment in American waters, every insult to the American flag by the British navy (perceived or actual), was viewed by US Navy officers as an affront to both national honor and their personal honor. Twice the strain between the two forces erupted into bloodshed – the attack on the *Chesapeake* and the clash between the USS *President* and HMS *Little Belt*. There were multiple times when violence was narrowly avoided. The importance of the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair and the *President-Little Belt* clash in shaping the course of Anglo-American relations has caused other naval altercations and near-misses over impressment to go largely unrecognized. More obscure events like the impressments off the *Baltimore* and *Gun Boat No. 6* are important because they heightened the animosity between the United States and the Royal Navies. As tensions increased, so did the resolve of US Navy leadership to humble British haughtiness, which helped set the stage for both well-known confrontations. The *Chesapeake* affair and the assault by the *President* were the direct result of James Barron and John Rodgers, respectively, upholding the honor of the United States against British effrontery. The immediate results of Barron's and Rodgers'

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<sup>2</sup> See, George Beale to Silas Talbot, letter, 21 September 1798, George Beale file; William Bainbridge to James Madison, letter, 23 July 1802, Samuel Helsdon file; Jonathan Coleman, Samuel Dildine, Peter Corey to the Commander of the American Frigate now lying off Portsmouth, letter, 14 November 1811, Misc. file; Jonathan Coleman to John Rodgers, letter, 2 November 1811, Jonathan Coleman file, RG 59, Entry 928, NACP.

actions were drastically different, but the ultimate consequence of both was to further deteriorate Anglo-American relations and push the two nations closer to war.

The United States Navy was officially created in 1794 by the Congressional “Act to Provide a Naval Armament.” The Naval Act of 1794, as it is more commonly known, authorized the construction of six frigates to protect American merchant vessels in the Mediterranean Sea from Algerian corsairs.<sup>3</sup> The idea of establishing a navy was not popular. Many Congressmen who later identified as Jeffersonians opposed the Naval Act because they believed buying Algerian peace was more practical and viewed the Act as a means to establish a permanent navy. A standing navy was a method of oppression and unnecessarily provoked the European powers – particularly Great Britain.<sup>4</sup> The opposition was strong, but not strong enough and Congress passed the Naval Act of 1794.<sup>5</sup>

Anti-navalist arguments about establishing a permanent navy turned out to be prophetic. Peace with Algiers was purchased via tribute, but the US Navy continued on. Throughout the Navy’s early history, its mission remained the same – to protect American trade. The US Navy engaged in the Quasi War with France over depredations on United States commerce in the West Indies. The First Barbary War was fought to end piracy against US merchantmen by the Barbary States including Tunis, Tripoli, and Morocco. The war was executed almost entirely by the US Navy. Great Britain,

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<sup>3</sup> “An Act to Provide a Naval Armament,” Chapter XII, 3<sup>rd</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., *Statutes at Large of the United States of America, 1789-1873* (Boston: Charles C. Little & James Brown, 1845), 1:350-51.

<sup>4</sup> William Giles was the mouthpiece for the anti-navalists. His final argument against a naval establishment summarized all the concerns of those opposed to a standing navy. *Annals of Congress of the United States*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 485-92.

<sup>5</sup> The bill passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 50 – 39 on March 17, 1794. Two days later the bill passed in the Senate, but the vote was not recorded. *Ibid.*, 71, 497-98.

however, was the largest threat to American trade. The Royal Navy seized millions of dollars worth of American cargo and impressed thousands of United States citizens. Britain's transgressions also went unanswered the longest. During the early existence of the United States Navy, the unchecked menace of the Royal Navy served as a constant reminder of the inability of the US Navy officers to carry out their mission.

The US Navy's first collision with the Royal Navy over impressment came in the midst of the Quasi War. The United States was engaged in a limited naval war with France from 1798 until 1800. Simultaneously, Great Britain and France were vying for European supremacy. Since the US and Royal navies were confronting the same foe, cooperation between the two seemed an obvious choice. Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert issued orders to his commanders instructing them "not to molest the Vessels of any nation with whom we were at peace – not even to interpose to prevent the capture of our own Merchant Vessels, by the armed ships of any Nation, except the French."<sup>6</sup> Stoddert did not explicitly mention the British, but nearly the entire US Navy was operating in the Caribbean and the only other nations with substantial naval forces in the region were France and Great Britain. Captain Isaac Phillips, commander of the sloop

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<sup>6</sup> Benjamin Stoddert to Captain Isaac Phillips, 20 February 1799, Record Grouping 45, Naval Records Collection of the Office of Naval Records and Library, Records of the Secretary of the Navy, 1798-1913, General Records, Letters Sent by the Secretary of the Navy to Officers, National Archives Microfilm Publication M-149, Reel 1, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC.

USS *Baltimore*, carried out Stoddert's order too enthusiastically and it cost him his career.<sup>7</sup>

The *Baltimore* was escorting a convoy of US merchant vessels to Havana, Cuba in November 1798. As the convoy approached Havana a Royal Navy squadron appeared and fired a shot across the bow of the lead ship. It was a squadron of considerable strength, consisting of HMS *Carnatic* (74), *Thunderer* (74), *Queen* (98), *Maidstone* (32), and *Grayhound* (32), under the command of Commodore John Loring. Captain Phillips stood towards the squadron and spoke with Loring, who ordered Phillips to make signal for the convoy to stop. Phillips complied with Loring's command and the merchant vessels *Norfolk*, *Friendship*, and *Eliza*, were all captured by the British. Loring sent an invitation for Phillips to come aboard *Carnatic*, which the American officer accepted. Once aboard, Loring inquired as to the number of hands aboard the *Baltimore*. When Phillips told him, the Commodore replied that the complement was too large for a sloop. Loring planned to remove any hands from the American vessel who did not have a protection. Phillips argued that there was no need for seamen aboard a United States public vessel to carry a protection, so few of them did. When Loring ordered officers aboard the *Baltimore*, though, Phillips acquiesced.<sup>8</sup>

The Royal Navy officers boarded the *Baltimore* and immediately took charge of the sloop. One intruder demanded that he be shown the ship's books in order to ascertain whether or not any Englishmen were serving aboard the vessel – he was refused this by

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Palmer, *Stoddert's War: Naval Operations during the Quasi War with France, 1789-1801* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 60-65.

<sup>8</sup> "Captain Phillips Account of this Affair," *The United States Naval Chronicle*, vol. 1 (1824), 118-120.

one of Phillips' subordinates, but Phillips did provide the *Baltimore's* watch lists. The British officer then mustered the American crew. Phillips stood upon the quarterdeck the entire time and offered no resistance. An officer from the *Baltimore* related the scene: "He [the ranking British officer] commenced calling names, paying no more respect to the officers than the common sailors, asking every man if he had an American protection, and upon being answered in the negative, put them on boats to go on board . . . swearing they were all Englishmen."<sup>9</sup> The British impressed fifty-five men off of the *Baltimore* before Phillips responded.

The American captain informed Loring that losing so many hands rendered the *Baltimore* unserviceable and he was prepared to surrender the sloop. Loring responded by returning fifty of the men he had removed. Of the five seamen retained, four were undoubtedly Americans and the fifth a naturalized citizen. Loring then proposed to exchange all of the American seamen in the British squadron for all of the British subjects aboard the *Baltimore*. Phillips refused and informed Loring that he would never voluntarily surrender any of his men, but if Loring wanted to return to the *Baltimore* and take any men the commodore believed to be British, Phillips would not oppose him. The Royal Navy squadron sailed soon afterward, taking with it the five seamen removed from the *Baltimore* and the merchant brig *Norfolk*, condemned for transporting contraband.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Maryland Herald*, 7 February 1807.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis Trevezant and William Timmons, Esqs., to C.G. Morton, Esq., 18 November 1798, in *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi War Between the United States and France*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1935), 2:26-27.

The news of the exchange between the British squadron and the USS *Baltimore* took a few months to reach the United States. When details began to emerge, the general response was outrage. Many newspapers ran the story under the headline “British Aggression.”<sup>11</sup> One unidentified officer from the *Baltimore* wrote an article that was part eye witness account, part editorial, in which he opined: “if justice is not done for so unparalleled an outrage on our flag, there is no need of having ships at all.”<sup>12</sup> In Congress, Virginia Representative Josiah Parker described the pressing off the *Baltimore* as an “outrage . . . the most flagrant and violent that could have been offered to the American flag.”<sup>13</sup> John Williams of New York echoed Parker’s sentiment and concluded: “Too many insults of this kind had been suffered, and it is time for this country to set their face against their commission.”<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, the response from the Navy Department was strong. After Phillips made his report of the incident to Benjamin Stoddert, the Secretary of the Navy replied sternly. Stoddert allowed that Phillips experienced unprecedented circumstances but concluded: “It is impossible to find an excuse for some parts of your conduct, among these it will be sufficient to mention your tame submission to the orders of the British Lieutenant on board your own ship.”<sup>15</sup> Phillips was dismissed from the US Navy. He appealed his cashiering to President Adams. Adams rejected the appeal because Phillips

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<sup>11</sup> For example, see *Gazette of the United States*, 4 January 1799; *The Philadelphia Gazette & Universal Daily Advertiser*, 10 January 1799; *Columbia Centinel*, 12 January 1799.

<sup>12</sup> *Maryland Herald*, 7 February 1799.

<sup>13</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 5<sup>th</sup> Congress, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sess., 2555.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Stoddert to Phillips, 10 January 1799, RG 45, M-149, Reel 1, NARA.

had not simply yielded to the British, but he had actively aided the Royal Navy in halting the merchant convoy, allowed a foreign officer to muster his crew, and handed over the *Baltimore*'s books.<sup>16</sup>

Stoddert sent a circular to all navy officers to ensure that Phillips' actions were not repeated. The Secretary must have been worried that the duty of a US Navy officer in the face of foreign aggression was unclear. Stoddert clarified, "on no pretence whatsoever are you to permit the public vessel under your command to be detained, or searched, nor any of the officers or men belonging to her to be taken from her by the ships or vessels of any foreign nation." Perhaps Stoddert was concerned that the same timidity Phillips displayed was present in other officers. His orders made clear that diffidence was not part of their duty. "If force should be exerted to compel your submission, you are to resist that force to the utmost of your power, and when overpowered by a superior force, you are to strike your flag and thus surrender your vessel, as well as your men; but never your men without your vessel."<sup>17</sup>

Stoddert also sent personal letters to various officers clarifying the reason for Phillips' dismissal. Thomas Truxton, commander of the USS *Constellation*, was told that Phillips' discharge did not result from his men being pressed, "but because he was active in submission. He never should have descended so low as to call all hands because he was ordered to do so by a British Lt on board of his own Ship."<sup>18</sup> Lieutenant Jonah Speak received a similar explanation – "It was because Captain Phillips . . . so tamely

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<sup>16</sup> Stoddert to Phillips, 20 February 1799, RG 45, M-149, Reel 1, NARA.

<sup>17</sup> Stoddert to the Commanders of Armed Vessels in the Service of the United States, circular, 29 December 1799, *American State Papers, Foreign Relations*, 1:204.

<sup>18</sup> Stoddert to Captain Thomas Truxton, 6 February 1799, RG 45, M-149, Reel 1, NARA.

gave his men, that he is as dismissed.”<sup>19</sup> Stoddert’s message was clear; allowing seamen to be removed from a United States public vessel by a foreign officer was unacceptable and marred the nation’s honor. Among the junior officers in service who were read Stoddert’s communication were James Barron, lieutenant aboard the USS *United States*; John Rodgers, lieutenant of the USS *Constellation*, and Stephen Decatur, midshipman, USS *United States* – each of whom played an important role in future confrontations over impressment.<sup>20</sup>

The USS *Ganges* and HMS *Surprise* nearly repeated the *Baltimore* incident just a few months later. The decisive actions of *Ganges* Captain Thomas Tingey starkly contrasted the pusillanimous Phillips and reinforced the importance of maintaining American sovereignty and upholding national honor. Tingey was sailing the *Ganges* through the Windward Passage (a strait separating Cuba from Hispaniola) when, on January 8, 1799, he fell in with HMS *Surprise*, commanded by Captain Edward Hamilton. When *Surprise* hailed the *Ganges*, Tingey hove to and the British sent a boat to the American sloop. A Royal Navy lieutenant boarded the *Ganges* and asked Tingey whether there were any Englishmen serving on the ship and mentioned examining the crew’s protections. Tingey responded that he considered, “all my crew Americans by birth or adoption,” and “that there were no protections on board to my knowledge – the only one we carried in our public ships being our flag.” The lieutenant departed and Tingey assembled his officers. “I declared to them my determination to fall sooner there

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<sup>19</sup> Stoddert to Lieutenant Jonah Speak, 6 February 1799; RG 45, M-149, Reel 1, NARA.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Barron Watson, *The Tragic Career of Commodore James Barron, US Navy, 1769-1851* (New York: Howard-McCann, 1942), 4-6; John H. Schroeder, *Commodore John Rodgers: Paragon of the Early Navy* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006), 10-14; Robert Allison, *Stephen Decatur: American Naval Hero, 1779-1820* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 17-28.

than suffer an investigation or permit any man's name to be called over."<sup>21</sup> Tingey ordered his crew to their stations when a second boat pulled away from *Surprise*. According to another *Ganges* officer, Tingey declared, "I will die at my quarters before a man shall be taken from the ship." – The crew gave him three cheers, ran to quarters, and called for Yankee Doodle."<sup>22</sup> The excitement was for naught, the second boat contained only the *Surprise*'s surgeon who came to request medical supplies.

An American naval officer relished the fact that the *Ganges* was not the easy prey Hamilton anticipated. "The *Surprise*, upon hearing our determination, chose rather to leave us than to fight for dead men!"<sup>23</sup> Naval historian Michael Palmer noted the possibility that sending surgeon John M'Mullen aboard the *Ganges* may well have been Captain Hamilton's method of testing Tingey's mettle. When M'Mullen saw the crew of the *Ganges* ready at their guns, he asked for minor medical supplies and reported back to Hamilton. *Surprise* was a sixth-rate frigate and the *Ganges* a sloop, but both carried the same compliment of twenty-four guns. Hamilton would have had his hands full if he had attempted to remove any crewmen from a resistant *Ganges*.<sup>24</sup> Whatever M'Mullen's purpose, the meeting between the *Ganges* and *Surprise* produced no violence, but did increase Anglo-American tensions. Tingey's actions also won him approval from his superiors and the public.

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<sup>21</sup> "Captain Thomas Tingey to the Printers of the *Norfolk Herald*," letter, 28 February 1799, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi War Between the United States and France* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1935) 2:412.

<sup>22</sup> "Extract of a Letter From An Officer of the *Ganges*," *New York Commercial Advertiser*, 21 February 1799.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Palmer, *Stoddert's War*, 90.

Benjamin Stoddert praised Tingey, writing him, “I have the pleasure of assuring you that your conduct has given great satisfaction to the President, and I doubt not to your country.”<sup>25</sup> Stoddert rewarded Tingey with “more agreeable arrangements” than the captaincy of a sloop-of-war. The *Aurora General Advertiser*, the influential Philadelphia newspaper, stated that Tingey’s conduct was “consistent with the manly character which he has sustained in all parts of the world and highly honorable to his country.”<sup>26</sup> The *Commercial Advertiser* of New York lauded Tingey’s “manly resistance” which proved “highly honorable to himself, and gratifying to the government.” The editorialist at the *Commercial Advertiser* was confident that Tingey’s “countrymen will reward him with their approbation and love. Such indecent outrages cannot be too manfully nor too readily resisted.”<sup>27</sup> Thomas Tingey had done little more than his duty as a US Navy officer, but his behavior offered a stark contrast to that of Isaac Phillips and the result was universal approbation.

A final incident concerning the removal of seamen from an American public vessel occurred at the mouth of the Bay of Cadiz during the First Barbary War. Lt. James Lawrence was commander of USS *Gun Boat No. 6* and had just finished crossing the Atlantic on June 12, 1805, when he was stopped off Cadiz by HMS *Dreadnought* (98). Lawrence went aboard the British ship-of-the-line to speak with her captain, Lord Alan Gardner. While Lawrence was aboard the *Dreadnought*, a British party boarded his gun boat. Three seamen, John Patterson, William White, and George Brown, appealed for

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<sup>25</sup> “Benjamin Stoddert to Captain Thomas Tingey,” 9 September 1799, *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi War*, 4:169.

<sup>26</sup> *Aurora General Advertiser*, 16 February 1799.

<sup>27</sup> *Commercial Advertiser*, 18 February 1799.

protection as British subjects and were removed from the gun boat and taken onto the *Dreadnought*. Lawrence protested the removal of his seamen – he did not believe them to be British, merely discontented crewmen. Furthermore, he could not suffer to have the American flag insulted in such a manner. When Captain Lord Gardner declined to return the seamen, however, there was little Lawrence could do – his tiny gun boat was heavily outmatched and could offer no resistance.<sup>28</sup>

The run-in between *Dreadnought* and Gun Boat No.6 hardly marked the end of US and Royal Navy tension. Hostility between the two forces grew in the Mediterranean Sea. The British accused the Americans of tempting seamen to desert the Royal Navy in Lisbon and enlist in the US Navy. The charge was vigorously denied.<sup>29</sup> Both navies maintained a regular presence in Malta and Syracuse. The close proximity resulted in perceived slights, direct insults, and occasionally violence, such as the duel between American Midshipman Joseph Bainbridge and Royal Navy clerk James Corcoran, in which the latter died.<sup>30</sup> The shared harbors also provided the opportunity for seamen pressed into the Royal Navy to plead their cases to American officers. Captain John Rodgers was anchored at Malta when he acted on some of these appeals. He attempted to recover incarcerated sailors John Kelly and Allen Fink. Captain Thomas Capell, commander of HMS *Phoebe*, received Rodgers' request, acknowledged that Kelly and

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<sup>28</sup> Lt. James Lawrence to Captain John Rodgers, 15 August 1805, RG 45, Letters Received By the Secretary of the Navy From Captains (Captain's Letters), National Archives Microfilm Publication M-125, Reel 2, NARA; Spencer Tucker and Frank Reuter, *Injured Honor: The Chesapeake-Leopard Affair, June 22, 1807* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1996), 66-67.

<sup>29</sup> Captain John Rodgers to Consul William Jarvis, 10 January 1805, RG 45, M-125, Reel 1, NARA.

<sup>30</sup> Lorenzo Sabine, *Notes on Duels and Duelling, Alphabetically Arranged with a Preliminary Historical Essay* (Boston: Crosby, Nichols, and Co., 1859), 126; John H. Schroeder, "Stephen Decatur: Heroic Ideal of the Young Navy," in *Quarterdeck and Bridge: Two Centuries of American Naval Leaders*, James Bradford, ed. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 63.

Fink might be Americans, but argued that their incomplete protections allowed him to assume the men were British.<sup>31</sup> Rodgers responded tersely:

Permit me to ask you sir, what law authorizes your impressing Seamen from an American Merchant vessel at sea? Whether it is an acknowledged privilege you have exercised over our Merchant vessels by official covenant existing between our two governments? Whether it is a peculiar privilege you especially enjoy by the acknowledged Law of Nations? Or whether it is a Law of necessity prescribed alone by your own idea of our rights according to the various exegeses which the necessity of having your ship well Manned may suggest to your imagination? If the latter, permit me to assure you that such policy you will find is not in your interest for thy very reason; that the effect of the principle would oblige us in returning to adopt the same system.<sup>32</sup>

If the relationship between the US and Royal navies grew tense in the Mediterranean, the situation was even more precarious in North American waters. The Peace of Amiens provided Europe with a year long hiatus from war, but collapsed in the spring of 1803. Great Britain relied on naval strength during the War of the Third Coalition, as it had during the previous fighting with France. Significantly for Anglo-American relations, the Royal Navy gradually eliminated the French presence from the West Indies. This campaign necessitated an increase in Royal Navy presence in American ports and along the United States coast.<sup>33</sup> The Royal Navy also began impressing seamen off inbound US merchant vessels, often times in American waters.

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<sup>31</sup> Captain John Rodgers to Captain Thomas Keppel [sic Capell]; Captain Keppel [sic Capell] to Rodgers, 17 July 1805, RG 45, M-125, Reel 2, NARA.

<sup>32</sup> Rodgers to Keppel [sic Capell], 18 July 1805, RG 45, M-125, Reel 2, NARA.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Woodman, *The Victory of Seapower: Winning the Napoleonic War, 1806-1814* (London: Chatham Publishers, 1998), 70-86.

Four times as many seamen were pressed by the British off vessels in American territorial waters between 1803 and 1807 than in the ten years preceding the Peace of Amiens.<sup>34</sup>

The Royal Navy's aggressive pursuit of manpower led to such incidences as the impressment of fourteen American fishermen in July 1805. The large number of men abducted at one time and the fact that they were fishermen, not merchant seamen, combined to make the event newsworthy across the country. Newspapers in South Carolina and Virginia condemned the impressments as eagerly as those in New York and New England.<sup>35</sup>

New York was a particularly dangerous port to enter during this period as a number of Royal Navy frigates stalked the waters in search of easy prey. Among the more notable incidents was when boats from HMS *Cambrian* entered the quarantine grounds on Staten Island and pressed seamen off the merchant packet *Pitt*. The *Pitt* was an English vessel, which *Cambrian*'s captain, William Bradley, used as a justification for his actions, but he had clearly violated American sovereignty.<sup>36</sup> A week later, *Cambrian* impressed four Americans off the merchantman *Diligence*, half a league from the Sandy Hook light house.<sup>37</sup> HMS *Leander* was in New York harbor as well and was

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<sup>34</sup> The statistics of impressments in American waters are taken from many records, including; Entry 928 letters of impressed seamen, Entry 929 Collector of Customs General Circular Instructions, Entry 930 Miscellaneous Lists and Papers Regarding Impressed Seamen, 1796-1818, Entry 931 Quarterly Abstracts of Application for the Release of Impressed Seamen, 1797 – 1801, Entry 932 Quarterly Returns of Impressed Seamen, 1805-1809, Entry 934 Letters from the Admiralty Office to Joshua Johnson, 1794-96, Entry 935 Index to Register of Applications for the Release of Impressed Seamen, 1797, Entry 936 Register of Applications for the Release of Impressed Seamen, 1792-1802, Misc., Rec., RG 59, NACP; Talbot Papers, G.W. Blunt-White Library; Message to Congress on Impressed Seamen, January 15, 1812.

<sup>35</sup> *Columbia Centinel*, 24 July 1805; *Albany Register*, 30 July 1805; *Boston Commercial Gazette*, 25 July 1805; *Alexandria Advertiser*, 1 August 1805; *Trenton Federalist*, 12 August 1805.

<sup>36</sup> *American Citizen*, 20 June 1804; *The Evening Post*, 20 June 1804.

not to be outdone by the *Cambrian*. *Leander* opened fire on two separate American merchant ships, the *Circero* and the *Live Oak*. Both cases occurred in American waters off Sandy Hook and in neither one had the *Leander* hailed the merchantmen before her captain, Richard Skene, ordered warning shots fired.<sup>38</sup> The aggressiveness of the *Leander* culminated in the killing of John Pierce after his ship, the *Richard*, refused to haul-to off Sandy Hook and the *Leander*'s warning shot decapitated the helmsman.

US Navy officers voiced their frustrations over the Royal Navy's burgeoning presence and increased aggressiveness. John Rodgers and Commodore Edward Preble pushed Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith hard for naval expansion, mostly in preparation for a war with Great Britain. Rodgers argued for the necessity of an expanded Navy to protect territorial waters, American commerce and American citizenry from the British.<sup>39</sup> Preble, meanwhile, fought for the construction of at least one 74-gun ship-of-the-line on par with those of the Royal Navy.<sup>40</sup> Captain Hugh Campbell complained to Smith concerning the impotence of the US Navy in the face of British impressments and seizures. "The Government of the United States . . . in their wisdom . . . have not thought proper to issue such orders that might in a great measure counteract that marauding system . . . nor have I the least shadow of an order to justify me in the attempt."<sup>41</sup>

Likewise, Captain Isaac Chauncey railed against British impressment. He was

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<sup>37</sup> *The Spectator*, 27 June 1804.

<sup>38</sup> *Republican Watch-Tower*, 15 August 1804.

<sup>39</sup> Captain John Rodgers to Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith, 31 December 1805, RG 45, M-125, Reel 2, NARA.

<sup>40</sup> Captain Edward Preble to Robert Smith, letter, 1 July 1806, RG 45, M-125, Reel 4, NARA.

<sup>41</sup> Captain Hugh Campbell to Robert Smith, letter, 1 February 1807, RG 45, M-125, Reel 7, NARA.

“mortified” by “the base treatment received from a people that we are at peace with” and “the most unwarrantable and insulting conduct towards the Flag and Citizens of a nation whom they pretend to respect.”<sup>42</sup> It was almost inevitable that mounting tensions resulted in open hostility. Surprisingly, though, it was the Royal Navy that turned violent first.

More British ships trolling American waters and anchoring in American harbors meant an increase in the number of Royal Navy deserters. British officers were eager to recover their men, but a problem arose. The Jay Treaty was the only existing agreement between Great Britain and the United States and it made no provisions for the restoration of deserters.<sup>43</sup> James Madison, as Secretary of State, decided to use the absence of an agreement on deserters to win concessions from Great Britain. When Royal Navy seamen ran from their ships and enlisted in the US Navy, little effort was made to return the men to their British vessels. Madison hoped his refusal to cooperate demonstrated to the British the importance of reaching an accord concerning impressment.<sup>44</sup>

American intransigence regarding deserters became particularly problematic in the Chesapeake Bay area by the summer of 1807. The Royal Navy had a strong force monitoring the Chesapeake because two French men-of-war had been forced into Norfolk. During the late winter and early spring of 1807, every Royal Navy ship in the Chesapeake squadron lost men to desertion. In March, five men ran from HMS

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<sup>42</sup> Captain Isaac Chauncey to James Madison, letter, 9 June 1807, RG 45, M-125, Reel 8, NARA.

<sup>43</sup> Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 108.

<sup>44</sup> David Erskine to Admiral Sir George Cranfield Berkeley, private, 11 December 1806, in *Injured Honor*, 76; James Madison to David Erskine, 7 January 1807, enclosed in Erskine #3 to Charles Grey, Viscount Howick, 1 February 1807, Great Britain Foreign Office Records, Public Record Office, London, FO 5/52, in Scott Thomas Jackson, “Impressment and Anglo-American Discord, 1787-1818,” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1976), 257-59.

*Melampus*, including William Ware, John Strachan, and Daniel Martin. Five more men deserted from HMS *Halifax*, among them was Ratford Jenkins. The majority of the deserters enlisted in the crew of the USS *Chesapeake*. The American frigate was preparing to sail to the Mediterranean, where it was to join the American squadron and Commodore James Barron was to take command.<sup>45</sup>

A flurry of correspondence began over the seamen. The British consul in Norfolk, John Hamilton, applied to Captain Stephen Decatur, the senior US Navy officer in the area, for the sailors' return. Decatur referred Hamilton to Lieutenant Arthur Sinclair, who was in command of the *Chesapeake*'s recruiting rendezvous in Norfolk.<sup>46</sup> The consul asked Sinclair to turn the men over, but the recruiting officer replied that he did not feel, "justified in delivering any men who are not apprentices, and who voluntarily entered the service of the U. States, unless claimed by the Magistracy."<sup>47</sup> So Hamilton turned to the civil authorities, who replied that the matter was outside of civil jurisdiction.<sup>48</sup>

Eventually the matter of the *Melampus* and *Halifax* deserters made its way to Washington, DC. British Minister David Erskine asked Secretary of State Madison that the deserters who had enlisted to serve aboard the *Chesapeake* be returned. Madison demurred on the grounds that there was no treaty concerning the restoration of deserters. Madison also informed Erskine that the men under question were believed to be

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<sup>45</sup> *Injured Honor*, 70-72.

<sup>46</sup> Consul John Hamilton to Captain Stephen Decatur; Decatur to Hamilton, letters, 6 March 1807, RG 45, M-125, Reel 7, NARA.

<sup>47</sup> Lt. Arthur Sinclair to Hamilton, 8 March 1807, RG 45, M-125, Reel 7, NARA.

<sup>48</sup> *Injured Honor*, 72.

Americans.<sup>49</sup> Eventually, Madison referred the question to Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith. Smith wrote to James Barron: “It is represented to me that William Ware, Daniel Martin, John Strachan, John Little, and others, deserters from a British ship of war at Suffolk have been entered by the recruiting officer at that place for our service. You will be pleased to make full enquiry relative to these men (especially if they are American Citizens) and inform me of the result.”<sup>50</sup>

In the end, the fate of Ware, Martin, Strachan, Ratford, and the other British deserters was James Barron’s to decide. Barron made a full inquiry into the four men specified by Smith. He reported back to the Secretary of the Navy:

William Ware pressed from on board the Brig Neptune Captain Craft by the British Frigate Melampus in the Bay of Biscay and has served aboard the said Frigate 15 Months. William Ware is a Native American born on Pipe Creek, Frederick County, State of Maryland, at Bruce Mills and served his time at said Mills. . . . He is an Indian looking man.

Daniel Martin was pressed at the same time and place. He is a Native of West Port in Massachusetts about 30 miles to the Eastward of New Port, Rhode Island . . . He is a colored man.

John Strachan born on the East Shore of Maryland, Queen Anne County between Centerville and Queenstown. . . . He was pressed on board the Melampus off Cape Finestre to better his situation he consented to enter. Being determined to make his Escape when opportunity offered, he served on board the Frigate two years. He is a white man about five feet 7 inches high.

John Little alias Francis and Ambrose Watts escaped from the Melampus at the same time, known by the above persons to be American but has not been entered by my Recruiting officers.<sup>51</sup>

Barron discovered that the men were Americans and had been impressed into the Royal Navy. He felt no compulsion to return them to the *Melampus* since they had been wrongfully forced into British service initially. The Commodore did not inquire as to

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<sup>49</sup> Jackson, “Impressment and Anglo-American Discord,” 264.

<sup>50</sup> Secretary Robert Smith to Captain James Barron, 6 April 1807, RG 45, M-149, Reel 6, NARA.

<sup>51</sup> James Barron to Robert Smith, 7 April 1807, RG 45, M-125, Reel 7, NARA.

whether any other of the *Chesapeake*'s crew may have been more legitimate British deserters. Instead, Barron used Martin, Ware, and Strachan as representative figures to discount all British claims to Royal Navy runaways aboard the *Chesapeake*.<sup>52</sup>

The leadership of the United States Navy made the conscious decision to retain the absconded seamen. James Madison may have adopted a policy of noncooperation, but at different times Arthur Sinclair, Stephen Decatur, Robert Smith and, in the final pronouncement, James Barron, were given the opportunity to judge the fate of alleged deserters in the crew of the *Chesapeake*. Each time the men chose to dismiss British claims and protect the alleged deserters. It is nearly impossible to imagine American naval officers and officials siding against their Royal Navy counterparts and allying themselves with common seamen had it not been for years of British provocation. The US Navy retaliated against British aggression by sheltering the commodity the Royal Navy desperately craved – able seamen. The Royal Navy had been bested at its own game . . . at least when it came to the runaways in the *Chesapeake*'s service.

The Royal Navy was not used to losing, though. Vice Admiral George Berkeley, the commander of the North American station, resolved to retrieve the seamen aboard the *Chesapeake*. Berkeley had been assigned to his present command in January 1806 and brought with him a marked animus concerning the United States. Spencer Tucker and Frank Reuter, in their work on the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair, speculated that Berkeley's

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<sup>52</sup> Anthony Steel, in "More Light on the Chesapeake," *Mariner's Mirror* 39 (1953), 243-65, argued that Barron was "deliberately evasive" regarding British deserters aboard the *Chesapeake* and chose to inquire only into the seamen he knew the Royal Navy had the weakest claim to. Jackson, in "Impressment and Anglo-American Discord," discounts the claim of Barron's duplicity and states that the distance between Barron at the Washington Navy Yard and the seamen at the Norfolk recruiting station, made it likely that Barron had no knowledge of other deserters. Another possibility is that Barron followed exactly the instructions he was given by Smith, which only specified Martin, Ware, Strachan and Little.

aggressive policy in North American was due to his political strength.<sup>53</sup> Berkeley held every possible advantage to advance his naval career; he was a member of Parliament, his brother was the Earl of Berkeley, his grandfather had been First Lord of the Admiralty, and he was related to Prime Minister Grenville, and President of the Board of Trade Earl Bathurst, the Duke of Richmond. In short, George Berkeley had more than sufficient political protection if he erred in executing his naval duties.<sup>54</sup> When diplomatic channels failed to facilitate the deserters' return, Berkeley decided to reacquire the lost seamen by force.

On June 1, 1807 Admiral Berkeley issued orders to the ship captains under his command to reclaim the deserters. Although Berkeley did not specify the use of force against the *Chesapeake*, he was aware that American leadership – including James Barron – had declined to return the seamen to the Royal Navy. The chances for pacific reclamation had passed.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, Berkeley dispatched HMS *Leopard*, under the command of Captain Salisbury Humphries, to the waters off Cape Henry. Humphries carried Berkeley's orders to the British squadron guarding the mouth of Chesapeake Bay. *Leopard* was Berkeley's flagship and Humphries had served as the admiral's flag captain for over a year. Humphries knew Berkeley's wishes concerning the recovery of deserters from the *Chesapeake*, so it was not a coincidence that the ship which met with the *Chesapeake* was the *Leopard*.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *Injured Honor*, 75.

<sup>54</sup> Edward E. Gaines, "George Cranfield Berkeley and the Chesapeake-Leopard Affair of 1807," in *America the Middle Period: Essays in Honor of Bernard Mayo*, ed. John B. Boles (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1973), 86-94.

<sup>55</sup> "By the Honorable George Cranfield Berkeley . . . to the Respective Captains and Commanders of His Majesty's Ships and Vessels on the North American Station," *ASP:FR* 3:12.

The *Leopard* arrived at Lynnhaven Bay<sup>57</sup> on the morning of June 21 and anchored in company with HMS *Bellona* (74) and HMS *Melampus* (40). James Barron and the *Chesapeake* sailed down the bay a few hours after the *Leopard*'s arrival. The American frigate anchored across the bay at Hampton Roads. James Barron had heard nothing official regarding the alleged British deserters aboard the *Chesapeake* since his last correspondence with Robert Smith on April 7. He had no reason to suspect that Captain Humphries and his fellow officers were meeting aboard the Royal Navy vessels anchored in Lynnhaven Bay to discuss which ship would follow the *Chesapeake* out to sea.<sup>58</sup>

The skies were clear and the winds favorable when the USS *Chesapeake* left harbor from Hampton Roads, Virginia on June 22, 1807. The *Chesapeake* was out to sea less than ten hours when it was hailed by HMS *Leopard*. The *Leopard* was a fifty gun man-of-war compared to the thirty-eight gun *Chesapeake*; when the British warship drew even with the American frigate, Commodore Barron had little choice but to back sail and speak with her. A small party from the *Leopard* boarded the *Chesapeake* and delivered to Barron a letter from Captain Humphreys.<sup>59</sup> It was a brief note accompanied by a copy of Admiral Berkeley's order and requested that Barron hand over any deserters from

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<sup>56</sup> *Injured Honor*, 75-78.

<sup>57</sup> Barron referred to the small inlet as Lin Flower Bay, but many of his contemporaries referred to it as Lynnhaven Bay. Historians have likewise identified it by its more common name, Lynnhaven Bay, which is part of Virginia Beach, Virginia today.

<sup>58</sup> During the board of inquiry following the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair, and in James Barron's court martial, multiple junior officers testified that they had heard rumors the British planned to forcefully recover deserters from the *Chesapeake*. This seems dubious. The *Leopard* arrived at Lynnhaven Bay only a few hours before the *Chesapeake* moved down to Hampton Roads and the two anchorages are separated by a considerable stretch of the Chesapeake Bay. It seems unlikely that news of Berkeley's orders traveled so far, so quickly.

<sup>59</sup> James Barron to Robert Smith, 23 June 1807, RG 45, M-125, Reel 8, NARA; "A True Copy Taken From the United States Frigate Chesapeake's Log Book. . .," in *The Chesapeake Affair of 1807*, by John C. Emmerson (Portsmouth, VA: Published by Author, 1954), 17.

HMS *Bellona*, *Bellisle*, *Triumph*, *Chichester*, *Halifax*, and *Zenobia* who were serving aboard the *Chesapeake*. Humphreys concluded with a cryptic message expressing hope that “the harmony subsisting between the two countries, may remain undisturbed.”<sup>60</sup>

Barron may have been slightly puzzled. Certain members of the *Chesapeake*'s crew had occupied enough of his time in March and early April, but John Strachan, Daniel Martin, and William Ware had fled from the *Melampus*. Neither Humphreys' note nor Berkeley's order made any mention of the *Melampus*. Of course, even if they had Barron had decided more than two months earlier that the United States had a more legitimate claim to the sailors' services than did the British. Barron denied that any deserters from the Royal Navy were serving aboard his ship and refused to ever “permit the Crew of any Ship that I command, to be mustered by any but their own Officers.”<sup>61</sup>

The boarding party returned to the *Leopard*. Despite the preemptory tone of Humphreys' letter, Barron did not expect any serious reaction from the British commander, as evinced by the fact that he neither ordered the *Chesapeake*'s decks cleared nor the gun crews to their posts. Within minutes, however, the *Leopard* opened fire on the *Chesapeake*. Over the course of twenty minutes, the *Leopard* fired six broadsides into the America frigate. The *Chesapeake*, due to her state of complete unreadiness, fired a single shot in return. Barron ordered the colors struck, indicating his surrender. Three crewmen lay dead, another eighteen wounded. A British press crew boarded the *Chesapeake* and carried away Daniel Martin, William Ware, John Strachan,

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<sup>60</sup> Barron to Smith, Enclosure #1, 23 June 1807, RG 45, M-125, Reel 8, NARA.

<sup>61</sup> Barron to Smith, Enclosure #2, 23 June 1807, RG 45, M-125, Reel 8, NARA.

and Ratford Jenkins. The *Chesapeake*, severely damaged, returned to Hampton Roads, less than two days after leaving port.<sup>62</sup>

The *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair, as it came to be known, brought the United States and Great Britain to the brink of war in the summer of 1807. The people of Norfolk were the first to react. On June 24, there was a town hall meeting during which a series of resolutions passed. The first called for the people of Norfolk to prepare for war; “be in readiness to take up arms in defence of those sacred rights which our forefathers purchased with their blood . . . until our government shall have been informed of the late glaring violation of our rights and sovereignty.” Subsequent resolutions included a cessation of all communication with the British, a prohibition on pilot service to British vessels, and a motion to withhold all supplies from the Royal Navy.<sup>63</sup> Merchant ship masters, then anchored in Norfolk and Portsmouth, held a meeting and unanimously offered their services in repairing Fort Norfolk, manning gun boats, or any other task necessary to repel a British attack.<sup>64</sup> Meanwhile, the governor of Virginia, William Cabell, ordered 1500 militiamen to Norfolk under the command of Thomas Matthews. Cabell’s orders to Matthews spoke of the Governor’s personal desire to “fan the holy flames” of patriotic fire lit by the attack on the *Chesapeake*. He warned Matthews, however, that President Jefferson desired a more cautious approach. Cabell instructed

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<sup>62</sup> Barron to Smith, letter, 23 June 1807, RG 45, M-125, Reel 8, NARA; “Report of Captain Salisbury Pryce Humphries,” in Emmerson, 21-23; Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Sea Power in its Relations to the War of 1812*, 2 vol. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1904), 1:155-170; Ian Toll, *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the US Navy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2006) 294-308.

<sup>63</sup> “A Meeting of the Citizens of the Borough of Norfolk and Town of Portsmouth . . .,” 25 June 1807, broadside, Early American Imprints, 2<sup>nd</sup> Series, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

<sup>64</sup> James Tucker to Thomas Jefferson, 27 June 1807, Thomas Jefferson Papers, American Memory Series (online), Series 1, General Correspondence, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter TJP-AMS.)

Matthews, “you will use your influence to prevent any rash or imprudent act which may compromise the nation . . . we should confine ourselves to measures of defense for repelling aggression or invasion.”<sup>65</sup>

Jefferson preached caution to Governor Cabell, but he and his Cabinet members also prepared to meet a British attack. Robert Smith placed Stephen Decatur in command of all US forces in Norfolk. Decatur was instructed to ready all available gunboats and on July 1, the young captain also took command of the *Chesapeake* and began repairing the frigate.<sup>66</sup> The next day, President Jefferson issued a proclamation ordering all British vessels from American waters.<sup>67</sup> Decatur informed the government, however, that the British squadron outside the Chesapeake Bay, had moved inside the Capes in defiance of the President’s decree, and was acting threateningly. The British vessels had fired on every ship passing in or out of the Capes. Captain John E. Douglas (commander of the British squadron) warned the people of Norfolk to annul the town resolution denying supplies to the Royal Navy or be considered in a state of war with Great Britain. Rumors spread that Douglas planned to attack Norfolk and cut out the *Chesapeake* and the French frigate *Cybelle*. Decatur wrote to Smith, “from their Movements it is my opinion they intend to attempt.”<sup>68</sup> While Decatur undertook to strengthen Norfolk’s defenses, Smith readied the rest of the Navy. He ordered the bomb ketch *Spitfire* from Baltimore to Norfolk. The gunboats at Hampton Roads were likewise ordered to Norfolk. The

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<sup>65</sup> Governor William Cabell to Thomas Matthews, 2 July 1807, TJP-AMS.

<sup>66</sup> Robert Smith to Stephen Decatur, 26 June 1807; Smith to Barron, 26 June 1807, RG 45, M-149, Reel 6, NARA.

<sup>67</sup> “A Proclamation, by Thomas Jefferson, President of the United States of America,” broadside, 2 July 1806, Broadside Collections, New York Historical Society, New York, New York.

<sup>68</sup> Decatur to Smith, letter with two enclosures, 29 June 1807, RG 45, M-125, Reel 8, NARA.

Secretary of the Navy wrote to Decatur, “It is hoped that we may not have occasion to resort to coercive means to compel the British Vessels of War to leave our coasts. But although we wish for peace we must be prepared for war.”<sup>69</sup>

War preparations were not limited to Norfolk. Smith ordered gunboats and bomb ketches to concentrate at New York, New Orleans, and Charleston. Secretary of War Henry Dearborn traveled to New York to help oversee the city’s defenses in case of a British attack. Dearborn also gave instructions for the strengthening of the fortifications in the major port cities and ordered every garrison ready to repel a British attack.<sup>70</sup> The Mediterranean squadron was ordered to return to the United States. On July 8, President Jefferson ordered Governor Cabell to make ready 100,000 Virginia militiamen and to call into service as many as Cabell needed to defend Norfolk.<sup>71</sup> “The British commanders have their foot on the threshold of war,” Jefferson explained, and the President was ready to oblige.<sup>72</sup>

War did not come, however. Jefferson was cautious. Bold, aggressive action was not in his nature. The President explained his position multiple times in the weeks after the *Chesapeake* was attacked. “The power of declaring war being with Congress, the Executive should do no act committing them to war.”<sup>73</sup> Instead, Jefferson dispatched a vessel to London with instructions to James Monroe, Minister Plenipotentiary, to demand the following concessions from Great Britain: disavowal of the attack on the *Chesapeake*,

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<sup>69</sup> Smith to Decatur, 16 July 1807, RG 45, M-149, Reel 6, NARA.

<sup>70</sup> Henry Dearborn to Henry Burbeck, 3 July 1807, TJP-AMS.

<sup>71</sup> Thomas Jefferson to William H. Cabell, 8 July 1807, TJP-AMS.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Henry Dearborn, 7 July 1807, TJP-AMS.

<sup>73</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Manning Rudolph, Jr., 5 July 1807, TJP-AMS.

reparations for the damages caused and lives lost, and security for the future. The last point referred specifically to a cessation of impressment on the high seas.<sup>74</sup> Initially, Jefferson seemed optimistic that his conditions would be met, but as time passed, he grew more and more pessimistic. “Reparation for the past and security for the future is demanded; and as I hardly believe they will grant them to the extent required, the probability is for war.”<sup>75</sup> The war fever was passing, though. Tensions were easing in the Chesapeake as the Royal Navy vessels departed Hampton Roads. Governor Cabell drew down the number of militia men defending Norfolk. Even Jefferson retired to Monticello as affairs quieted.<sup>76</sup>

As summer turned to fall and Congress prepared to reconvene, President Jefferson readied for the return of the USS *Revenge* from England. Jefferson was sure the ship carried word that the British government failed to meet his stipulations. The President still assumed war was the nation’s immediate future. At the end of September, Jefferson was conferring with Madison about the appropriateness of having a militia and volunteer force poised to invade Canada prior to October 26. That way, as soon as Congress declared war (presumably its first order of business) the raid into Lower Canada could commence without delay.<sup>77</sup> By October 26, though, Jefferson was the only person still pondering a war with England. Eventually, Jefferson fell back on the

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<sup>74</sup> James Madison to James Monroe, 6 July 1807, James Madison Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

<sup>75</sup> Jefferson to Randolph, Jr., 20 July 1807, TJP-AMS.

<sup>76</sup> Cabell to Jefferson, 19 July 1807; Cabell to Jefferson 21 July 1807, TJP-AMS.

<sup>77</sup> Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 20 September 1807, in *The Republic of Letters: The Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, 1776-1826*, ed. James Morton Smith (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1995), 3:1498-99.

Republican favorite of economic coercion, this time in the form of an embargo, to wring concessions out of Great Britain.

The embargo was no more successful in halting impressment or lifting the Orders in Council than previous trade measures. By the time the embargo was lifted James Madison was president and the threat of war against Great Britain had seemingly passed. The tension between the US and Royal Navies had scarcely lessened, however, and another clash between the two forces was in the making. When James Madison became president he replaced Robert Smith with Paul Hamilton as Secretary of the Navy. Hamilton was not a navy man, hardly unique in that respect among the early navy secretaries, but he had no maritime experience at all. Hamilton's qualifications included land service in the American Revolution, running a plantation, and political success as a loyal Jeffersonian.<sup>78</sup> Despite his ignorance of seafaring, Hamilton brought to office a resolve sorely lacking from the Jefferson administration. Hamilton was determined to uphold US sovereignty and American honor. The Secretary believed the best means of accomplishing that goal was to force a confrontation between an American and British warship. He issued a number of circulars and orders during his first year in Washington that clearly indicated his purpose.

Hamilton's first circular to the Navy's captains and master commandants (a rank in the early US Navy between lieutenant and captain) explained his general attitude concerning the disposition of the Navy. "It is our bounden duty to be prepared for any event that may arise. Peace is the season for preparation – war, for action. . . . we must

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<sup>78</sup> Gene A. Smith, "Paul Hamilton," *American National Biography*, online, [www.anb.org](http://www.anb.org), accessed 12 January 2013.

place ourselves in an attitude for war, for we know not how soon it may overtake us.”<sup>79</sup>

The Secretary of the Navy encouraging his officers to stand on guard hardly seems revolutionary, but it was James Barron’s lack of preparation that resulted in the humiliation of the *Chesapeake* attack. Hamilton’s first order was aimed at ensuring Barron’s folly was not repeated.

Hamilton turned to aggression after stressing readiness. He sent orders to Hugh Campbell, Stephen Decatur, and John Rodgers, who commanded the Charleston, Norfolk, and New York stations, respectively. These three cities were among those ports most affected by impressment, as detailed in Chapter One. “If within a marine league of the coast of the United States, any British or French armed vessel should molest any of our merchant vessels, you will use all the means in your Power to protect and defend such merchant vessels; within the harbor, and within the waters of the United States above low water mark.”<sup>80</sup> The Royal Navy maintained its strongest presence in American waters at Sandy Hook, close to New York harbor, and off Cape Henry near Norfolk. It was almost inevitable that a British warship was going to harass an American merchantman within a marine league of New York or Norfolk. Perhaps that is why Hamilton sent further instructions to Decatur and Rodgers. This time the Secretary stressed the importance of upholding American honor.

You, like every other patriotic American have observed and deeply feel the injuries and insults heaped on our country . . . . Amongst these stands most conspicuous the inhuman and dastardly attack in our frigate *Chesapeake* – an outrage – which prostrates the flag of our country and imposed on the American people cause of ceaseless mourning. . . . What has been perpetrated may again be

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<sup>79</sup> Paul Hamilton to John Rodgers, William Bainbridge, Steven Decatur, John Smith and Samuel Evans, circular, 6 August 1809, RG 45, M-149, Reel 8, NARA.

<sup>80</sup> Hamilton to Hugh Douglas, David Porter, Rodgers, and Decatur, 5 June 1810, RG 45, M-149, Reel 8, NARA.

attempted: it is therefore our duty to be prepared and determined at every hazard to vindicate the injured honor of our Navy and revive the drooping spirits of the nation. Influenced by these considerations, it is expected that while you conduct the force under your command consistently with the principles of a strict and upright neutrality, You are to maintain and support, at any risk and cost, the dignity of Your flag.<sup>81</sup>

John Rodgers certainly proved willing to cooperate with the new secretary.

Captain Rodgers received Hamilton's orders eagerly and quickly penned a response. "I . . . flatter myself, sir, that should a similar indignity be again offered to our flag by any force that is not vastly our superior, England will have no just reason to triumph at the result."<sup>82</sup> Rodgers passed Hamilton's orders down to the junior officers under his command at New York station. Captain Rodgers instructed his subordinates of what was expected of them if the British attempted to use force against an American warship again. "Should a shot be fired at one of our Vessels and strike any part of her, it ought to be considered an Act of Hostility, meriting chastisement to the utmost extent of all your force."<sup>83</sup>

While Rodgers was amenable to Hamilton's program, an opportunity to strike back at British aggression did not immediately present itself around New York. Hamilton, therefore, began sending officers to chase after fights. When Savannah merchants complained of Royal Navy vessels raiding shipping lanes off the Georgia coast, Hamilton ordered Captain Stephen Decatur to patrol the waters around Amelia Island, from where the British ships were operating.<sup>84</sup> The Royal Navy continued its

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<sup>81</sup> Hamilton to Rodgers and Decatur, 9 June 1810, RG 45, M-149, Reel 8, NARA.

<sup>82</sup> Rodgers to Hamilton, 15 June 1810, RG 45, M-125, Reel 19, NARA.

<sup>83</sup> Rodgers to Captain Isaac Hull, Lt. James Lawrence, Lt. Oliver H. Perry, and Captain Jacob Jones, 4 August 1810, RG 45, M-125, Reel 19, NARA.

presence in the United States' southern waters and impressed men off several coastal traders. Hamilton responded by sending Captain John Dent to support Decatur's efforts. The Secretary reminded Dent, "that in your hands the national honor will receive no new insult with impunity."<sup>85</sup> Neither Decatur nor Dent was able to force a confrontation with a British warship.

A second clash between the US and Royal navies did occur though. John Rodgers, commanding the *President*, pursued and engaged HMS *Little Belt* in May 1811. Rodgers acted on orders from Paul Hamilton. Once more the impetus of the firefight was the impressment of an American seaman.

John Rodgers was visiting family in Havre de Grace, Maryland on May 8, 1811 when orders arrived from Secretary Hamilton to "resume [his] station at New York and proceed to execute . . . orders for the protection of the commerce of the United States."<sup>86</sup> Hamilton drafted those instructions in reaction to the aggressive patrolling of two British frigates outside the New York harbor, HMS *Melampus* and HMS *Guerriere*. The *Guerriere* especially had affronted American honor. On April 9, the British frigate stopped the American merchant brig *Friendship*, boarded her, and pressed William Harding, of Chatham, Massachusetts.<sup>87</sup> The *New York Gazette* ran a short piece about the pressing of passenger John Pye and a seaman named Hutchins from the merchant sloop

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<sup>84</sup> Hamilton to Decatur, 20 August 1810, RG 45, M-149, Reel 8, NARA.

<sup>85</sup> Hamilton to Captain John Dent, 23 August 1810, RG 45, M-149, Reel 8, NARA.

<sup>86</sup> Hamilton to Rodgers, 6 May 1811, RG 45, M-149, Reel 9, NARA.

<sup>87</sup> "Shipping News," *Farmer's Repository*, 20 April 1811.

*Ezra* by *Guerriere* off the Carolina coast in early April.<sup>88</sup> The *Public Advertiser* printed a similar piece regarding the pressing of William Lewis, despite his possession of a protection certificate.<sup>89</sup> On May 1, *Guerriere* again stopped an American merchant vessel, the *Spitfire*, and impressed Maine native John Diggio (sometimes spelled Diguio). Hamilton's orders to Rodgers fit neatly into the pattern of commands he had issued during his tenure.

It is also interesting to note that in the week prior to the news of the *President-Little Belt* clash reaching the public, several newspapers reported that Rodgers had put to sea with the purpose of seeking out the *Guerriere*. The *Columbian Centinel*, of Boston, ran the story under the prescient headline "Bloody News Expected." The piece stated, "the President of the U. States has ordered Commodore Rodgers, in the President of 44 guns, to search after and demand of Capt. Pechell, of the British frigate *Guerriere* of 38 guns, the restoration of American seamen which have been recently and wantonly impressed on board that ship, and in the event of refusal to use force to obtain them."<sup>90</sup> Newspapers from Dover, New Hampshire to Milledgeville, Georgia ran similar stories.<sup>91</sup> The tension over impressment was palpable and newspaper editors across the country knew a clash between the US and British navies was in the offing. The only incorrect detail was the identity of the British ship.

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<sup>88</sup> "Shipping News," *New York Gazette*, 11 April 1811.

<sup>89</sup> "Shipping News," *Public Advertiser*, 12 April 1811.

<sup>90</sup> "Bloody News Expected," *Columbian Centinel*, 25 May 1811.

<sup>91</sup> For examples see: *Baltimore Sun*, 24 May 1811; *The Sun* (Dover, New Hampshire), 25 May 1811; "Highly Important," *The Chronicle* (New York), 25 May 1811; "Important – If True," *Georgia Argus*, 12 June 1811.

Rodgers acted immediately. By May 10, he had reached Annapolis and boarded the USS *President*. On the fourteenth the Commodore and his ship were on the open seas.<sup>92</sup> Two days later the *President* was cruising in international waters fifty miles northeast of Cape Henry when, around noon, an unknown ship was sighted in the east moving toward Rodgers' command. Rodgers determined the ship to be a man-of-war, based off the symmetry of her sails. More specifically, Rodgers had reason to believe the vessel could have been the *Guerriere*. The commodore raised the *President's* ensign and pendant, which caused the approaching vessel to change course to the south. Rodgers gave chase after the unknown ship in order to speak with her. More than six hours later, the *President* had closed the distance between the two ships to less than one hundred yards. During the pursuit, Rodgers had been unable to confirm the size or nationality of his prey. It was nightfall before the *President* overhauled the other vessel. Rodgers used a speaking trumpet to request the other ship's identity. The same question was shouted back at the *President* in response. Rodgers repeated his query and this time the unidentified vessel responded with a cannon shot. The *President* fired a single gun in return, which was met by three quick shots, followed by a broadside and scattered musketry fire. Rodgers directed his gun crews to open fire on the hostile vessel. After several minutes, the commodore ordered a cease-fire, believing that he had silenced his opponent's guns. Several minutes later, however, the mystery ship renewed firing on the *President*, and in turn Rodgers ordered his gunners to return fire. The resistance that the *President* met was feeble, and after a short time Rodgers ordered another cease fire. He once more inquired as to the identity of the vessel. Rodgers learned that his foe was one

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<sup>92</sup> Charles Oscar Paulin, *Commodore John Rodgers: Captain, Commodore, and Senior Officer of the American Navy, 1773-1838, A Biography* (Cleveland, OH: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1910), 219-220.

of His Britannic Majesty's ships. Rodgers moved the *President* off to the leeward side of his opponent and spent the night repairing what little damage his frigate had sustained.<sup>93</sup>

On the morning of May 17, Rodgers learned the magnitude of the damage he had inflicted on his opponent. He also discovered his opponent's name. It was HMS *Little Belt*, a sixth-rate, 460-ton sloop-of-war with only twenty guns. It was clearly no match for the *President*, which was nearly four times bigger and boasted three times as many guns. The results of the engagement bear this out. The *President* suffered only slight damage to its foremast and top mainmast, with only one seaman wounded. *Little Belt* was not so lucky – its spars, sails, and rigging were all but destroyed, it was shot through in multiple places, there was severe interior damage, and the human toll was even heavier. Thirteen crew members had been killed and another nineteen wounded. Rodgers offered assistance to *Little Belt's* captain, Arthur Bingham, and expressed his regret that the incident had occurred at all. Bingham declined the commodore's offer. Though badly damaged and short-handed, *Little Belt* managed to limp back to Halifax. The *President* made for New York and anchored off Sandy Hook on May 23, where Rodgers wrote a full report of the incident for Secretary Hamilton.<sup>94</sup>

Rodgers related in his report of the incident that *Little Belt*, “owing to her great length, her having a poop and topgallants, forecastle, and the room to mount three more guns a side than she actually carries, her deep bulwark, and the manner of stowing her hammocks, she has the appearance of a frigate” and he chased her as such. It bears repeating that the British frigates most recently spotted in the vicinity were *Melampus*

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<sup>93</sup> Rodgers to Hamilton, 23 May 1811, RG 45, M-125, Reel 21, NARA.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

and *Guerriere*. Only after closing with *Little Belt* and exchanging broadsides did Rodgers realize how inferior in size his opponent actually was.<sup>95</sup>

The relative weakness of the *Little Belt* caused Commodore Rodgers much distress. According to the commodore, the damage inflicted upon the British sloop and the consequent loss of life among its crew caused him “much pain” and to “regret extremely” the events of May 8, 1811. Rodgers summarized, however, that Bingham began the fight: “there was no alternative left me, between such a sacrifice [the thirteen British dead] and one which would have been still greater; namely to have remained a passive spectator of insult to the flag of my Country, whilst it was confided to my protection.”<sup>96</sup> Rodgers acknowledged the possibility that his engagement with the *Little Belt* could potentially damage his reputation as much as the *Chesapeake*’s humiliation had ruined James Barron’s. There was little honor gained from aggressively pursuing and engaging an inferior opponent. This adds weight to the argument that Rodgers believed he was chasing the *Guerriere*. It also explains why Rodgers insisted that a court of inquiry be held to verify that the *Little Belt* fired twice on the *President* before Rodgers offered a broadside in return, thus absolving him of any wrongdoing.

Both Secretary Hamilton and President James Madison were quick to state their approval of Rodgers’ actions. “I declare that my sentiments toward and estimation of you go beyond what may be expressed by the words esteem and respect,” Hamilton gushed.<sup>97</sup> Madison adopted a more reserved tune, but still expressed his approbation for Rodgers’ honorable conduct. Word of the *President-Little Belt* engagement spread quickly.

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Hamilton to Rodgers, 28 May 1811, RG 45, M-149, Reel 9, NARA.

Republican newspapers praised Rodgers for his actions. “The event itself has excited a sensation perfectly decisive to the *wishes* and the *feelings* of the nation, on the subject of our *flag* and our *impressed* citizens,” stated the *Weekly Aurora*. “Not a man of any party . . . has expressed a sentiment, but such as renders credit to Rodgers.”<sup>98</sup> *The Sentinel of Freedom* echoed the *Aurora*. “The conduct of the commodore in this affair must command the hearty approbation of every American . . . he was placed in a situation that no alternative but the use of arms could save him from disgrace, and his country from dishonor.”<sup>99</sup> From Wilmington, Delaware the *American Watchman* expressed gratitude. “Thanks to the gallant Rodgers and our brave tars – they have shewn us a specimen of what they can do, and of what may be expected when imperious necessity requires their service.”<sup>100</sup>

After extolling Rodgers for his valiant defense of national honor, newspapers began to praise him for avenging the Chesapeake. *The Columbian* observed, “It appears from this [the engagement with the Little Belt] that the ATTACK on the Chesapeake, and its consequences, are not forgotten by our tars.”<sup>101</sup> At a Fourth of July celebration in Williamsburg, Virginia, the following toast was offered: “To Commodore Rodgers – The Genius of Independence was entombed in the blood-stained Chesapeake: but this angel of ’76 has rolled away the tombstone and the fair goddess is arisen.”<sup>102</sup> It also did not take long for the *President-Little Belt* affair to be memorialized in song. A little over a month

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<sup>98</sup> *Weekly Aurora*, 28 May 1811.

<sup>99</sup> *The Sentinel of Freedom*, 4 June 1811.

<sup>100</sup> *American Watchman*, 29 May 1811.

<sup>101</sup> *The Columbian*, 1 June 1811.

<sup>102</sup> *The Enquirer*, 16 July 1811.

after the engagement, a tune named “Tit For Tat” appeared in the *Palladium of Liberty* and stressed the connection between the *Chesapeake-Leopard* incident and the destructive assault on the *Little Belt*.

You all remember well, I guess, the Chesapeake disaster  
When Britons dared to kill and press to please their Royal master.  
That day did murder'd freemen fall, their graves are cold and sandy  
Their funeral dirge was sung by all, not yankee doodle dandy. . . .  
But finding injuries prolong'd become a growing evil  
Our Commodore got leave if wrong'd to blow 'em to the devil . . .  
A brilliant action then began, our fire so briskly burned, sir  
While blood from British scuppers ran, like seventy-six returned sir.  
Our cannon roar'd, our men huzza'd and fired away so handy  
Til Bingham struck, he was so scar'd, at hearing doodle dandy.<sup>103</sup>

The *President-Little Belt* affair fit well into many different narratives. Depending on one's perspective, John Rodgers had defended American sovereignty, upheld the nation's honor, or avenged the *Chesapeake* – perhaps he had accomplished all three. The importance of impressment in causing the *President-Little Belt* affair is clear, though. The actions of HMS *Guerriere* caused Hamilton to deploy Rodgers in an effort to protect American merchantmen. Rodgers put to sea with the aggressive mind frame encouraged by the Secretary of the Navy over the previous two years. When the *President* spied a foreign ship with characteristics similar to the *Guerriere*, Rodgers pursued the vessel.

The manner in which Anglo-American relations were adversely effected by the *President's* attack is not as apparent as with the *Chesapeake* affair. The situation between the United States and Great Britain was already deteriorating. The United States Minister to England, William Pinkney, had returned to America earlier in the year, convinced that diplomacy had failed. President Madison had no intention of replacing

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<sup>103</sup> “Tit for Tat,” *Palladium of Liberty*, 25 June 1811.

Pinkney.<sup>104</sup> Nonintercourse with Great Britain was reestablished in February 1811. Madison had also started laying the groundwork for a declaration of war through an interview with the editor of the *National Intelligencer*.<sup>105</sup> Even so, certain conclusions can be reached. The thrashing of the *Little Belt* renewed the American people's confidence in their navy. That much is evident by the praise heaped upon Rodgers. In Great Britain, the *President-Little Belt* clash had some Britons clamoring for war. From London, *The Courier* demanded a declaration of war, while in Liverpool an editorialist viewed the attack on the *Little Belt* as a scheme by Madison to lure Great Britain into formalized hostilities.<sup>106</sup>

President Madison did not discount the possibility that the *President's* assault could produce such an outcome. Madison wrote to Jefferson in the weeks following the incident: "You see the new shapes our foreign relations are taking. The occurrence between Rogers and the British ship of war . . . will probably end in an open rupture, or a better understanding, as the calculations of the B. Gov. may prompt or dissuade from war."<sup>107</sup>

The *President-Little Belt* clash certainly caused the US and Royal navies to assume a war footing. Secretary Hamilton believed that the Royal Navy planned to seek out Rodgers and the *President* in order to avenge *Little Belt*. He ordered Captain Stephen Decatur, with the frigate *United States*, from Norfolk to New York in order to reinforce

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<sup>104</sup> Braford Perkins, *Prologue to War: England and the United States, 1805-1812* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970), 309-12.

<sup>105</sup> *National Intelligencer*, 16 April 1811.

<sup>106</sup> Jonathon W. Hooks, "A Friendly Salute: The *President-Little Belt* Affair and the Coming of the War of 1812," (Ph.D. diss., University of Alabama, 2009), 155-57.

<sup>107</sup> Madison to Jefferson, 7 June 1811, in *Republic of Letters*, 3:1669.

the *President*. By the end of June, a considerable Royal Navy presence was gathered near New York. HMS *Euridyce*, *Melampus*, and *Atalanta*, all frigates, as well as the sloop *Sapphire* patrolled the waters off Sandy Hook, apparently waiting for the *President* to emerge. Rodgers wished to accept the challenge and informed Hamilton.<sup>108</sup> The Secretary responded by instructing Rodgers, “while you will not unnecessarily throw yourself in the way of a force greatly your superior, you will not by any of your movements manifest any apprehensions of danger. . . . The eyes of the nation are upon you, Commodore; you will be prudent as firm and firm as prudent.”<sup>109</sup> In the end, Rodgers decided it was not prudent to meet the British challenge, and no confrontation occurred. The US Navy remained prepared for war, though.

During the fall of 1811, a *Chesapeake* affair type situation was taking shape in England. Captain Isaac Hull, commanding the USS *Constitution*, was at Portsmouth when an American deserted the Royal Navy and joined Hull’s crew. Hull felt sure that the seaman was a New York native pressed into British service and had no intentions of returning him. Rumors began to circulate that the Royal Navy planned to forcibly remove the man from the *Constitution* once the frigate put to sea. Hull prepared the *Constitution* accordingly. “I am now getting ready and hope to be able to give them a fight for him,” Hull wrote Hamilton, “there can be no doubt but he is an American.”<sup>110</sup> The *Constitution* was not pursued by any British warship, but the potential for yet another fight over impressment was evident.

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<sup>108</sup> Rodgers to Hamilton, 27 June 1811, RG 45, M-125, Reel 22, NARA.

<sup>109</sup> Hamilton to Rodgers, 29 June 1811, RG 45, M-149, Reel 9, NARA.

<sup>110</sup> Isaac Hull to Paul Hamilton, 20 November 1811, Isaac Hull Papers, Naval Historical Society Collection, NYHS.

In the spring of 1812, Hamilton dispatched John Rodgers to the Capes of the Delaware. HMS *Guerriere*, in company with an unnamed frigate, took to harassing American shipping sailing out of Wilmington, Delaware. The secretary ordered Rodgers to sea with all the vessels under his command to put a stop to the British aggression. “I hope and do assure myself,” Hamilton wrote, “that if you find proper occasion . . . you will inflict merited chastisement on foreign insolence.”<sup>111</sup> Rodgers did not find occasion, however, and the next donnybrook between the US and Royal navies occurred after a declaration of war.

The British abduction of American seamen was the key component in creating and sustaining the bad blood between the US and Royal navies. The hard feelings began during the Quasi War when HMS *Carnatic* impressed fifty-five seamen off the USS *Baltimore*. The animosity only increased over the next fourteen years as the United States and Great Britain crept steadily toward war. The place of impressment in the causality of the War of 1812 is the topic of the next chapter, but the antagonistic relationship that festered between the US and Royal navies played an important part in the deterioration of Anglo-American relations. The *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair brought the two nations to the precipice of war in the summer of 1807. Four years later, the *President-Little Belt* clash helped ready the American and British people for a conflict long in the making. Both events were the culmination of mounting tensions created principally by disputes over the Royal Navy’s relentless practice of harassing American shipping and impressing American seamen.

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<sup>111</sup> Hamilton to Rodgers, 9 April 1812, RG 45, M-149, NARA

CHAPTER SEVEN:  
“AGAINST THIS CRYING ENORMITY;”  
IMPRESSMENT IN THE DECISION FOR WAR

On June 18, 1812, President James Madison signed into law, “An Act declaring war between Great Britain and her dependencies, and the United States and her territories.” Two days later, Madison received a letter from Allen Strong. Strong was in prison for passing a bad five-dollar note. He wrote to request Madison’s intervention. Strong had spent eleven months shackled aboard a British frigate in 1805, and with the declaration of war, he yearned to avenge his impressment. Strong wanted to, “defend the wrights of our National Independence, against the infestigators of our commerce and freedom.” The petty criminal wished to enlist in the United States Army to fight against Great Britain, but the civil authorities refused to release him from prison. An order from the President could free Strong and allow him to join the fray.<sup>1</sup> Other seamen liberated from impressment were as eager as Strong to contribute to the war effort. David Bunnell hurried to a Navy recruiting station and served under Oliver Hazard Perry on Lake Erie. Nicholas Isaacs signed on as an able hand for the Connecticut privateer, *Rolla*. Joshua Penny provided valuable service as a militia sergeant on Long Island, so much so that the British sent a raiding party ashore to apprehend him. These men, and many others like them, had waited years for the United States to go to war against impressment. When their opportunity for vengeance arrived, they seized it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Allen B. Strong to James Madison, letter, 20 June 1812, *The Papers of James Madison: Presidential Series*, ed. J.C.A. Stagg, 8 vols. (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 4:492-93. Hereafter cited as *PJM*.

<sup>2</sup> David C. Bunnell, *The Travels and Adventures of David C. Bunnell . . .* (Palmyra, NY: J.H. Bortles, 1831); Nicholas P. Isaacs, *Twenty Years Before the Mast, or Life in the Forecastle Being the Experiences and Voyages of Nicholas Peters Isaacs* (New York: J.P. Beckwith, 1845); Joshua Penny, *The Life and Adventures of Joshua Penny . . .* (New York: Published by the Author, 1815).

If American seamen needed confirmation that the United States had declared war on their behalf, proof arrived two weeks after the declaration of war. Captain David Porter flew a large banner proclaiming “Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights” from the mainmast of the USS *Essex*. This became the unofficial slogan of the War of 1812. Porter summed up in five words why the United States was at war and what the country hoped to achieve. Versions of the pennant flew later on the USS *Chesapeake*, the USS *Constitution*, the privateer *Alexander*, and at Dartmoor prison – hung there by American prisoners of war.<sup>3</sup>

For almost a hundred years after the conclusion of the War of 1812, historian and the public alike accepted impressment as a primary cause of the war, if not the principal *causus belli*. John Armstrong, Secretary of War from 1813-1814, took an unequivocal stand on the importance of impressment in his history of the conflict, *Notices of the War of 1812*. “The personal rights of our seamen were invaded; and men, owing her [Britain] no allegiance . . . were forcibly seized, dragged upon her ships of war and made to fight her battles under the scourge of tyrants and slaves. Evils of such magnitude and continuance could not fail to produce a large degree of excitement in the nation.”<sup>4</sup> Two of the most famous histories of the war stressed the role of impressment, as well. Alfred Thayer Mahan wrote that, “the two principal immediate causes of the War of 1812, were the impressment of seamen from American merchant ships, upon the high seas, to serve in the British navy” and the Orders in Council.<sup>5</sup> Theodore Roosevelt stressed

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Gilje, *Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights in the War of 1812* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 261-266.

<sup>4</sup> John Armstrong, *Notices of the War of 1812* (New York: George Dearborn, 1836), 1:12.

<sup>5</sup> Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Sea Power in It’s Relation to the War of 1812* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1905) 2.

impressment's part in pushing the United States and Great Britain to war. The "system of impressment . . . was repugnant to every American idea. . . . The wrongs inflicted on our seafaring men by their impressment into foreign ships formed the main cause of the war."<sup>6</sup> This interpretation reach its zenith with James Zimmerman's *The Impressment of American Seamen*, published in 1926. Zimmerman's monograph presented the first full discussion of impressment's importance in the early American republic. Zimmerman did not dwell on references to impressment in the declaration of war, but he left no doubt about the prominence he attached to the practice: "It was impressment that, in that last analysis, gave the greatest impulse to the war sentiment."<sup>7</sup> Even before the Zimmerman book, though, academics started to question the significance of abducted seamen.

Some historians were discontented with the standard maritime causality of the War of 1812, which was inevitable to a degree. Contemporary critics of the Madison administration never accepted that maritime differences with Great Britain necessitated a war. Federalist opponents argued that Republicans overplayed impressment and that French seizures of American shipping equaled those of Great Britain. Most famously, Old Quid Republican John Randolph railed in Congress that the true reason for war was territorial acquisition. "We have heard but one word – like the whip-poor-will, but one eternal monotonous tone – Canada! Canada! Canada!"<sup>8</sup> The conflict was years in the making, which also clouded the causality. If the war was over impressment, why did the United States not go to war in 1807 when the practice was at its peak? If the war was

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<sup>6</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812; or, The History of the United States Navy During the Last War with Great Britain* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1882), 33.

<sup>7</sup> James Zimmerman, *The Impressment of American Seamen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925), 177.

<sup>8</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 12<sup>th</sup> Congress, 1<sup>st</sup> session, 533.

about trade restriction and neutral rights, why not a triangular war against both France and Great Britain? Madison further complicated the question with his war message by including accusations against Great Britain of agitating Native American raids on the frontier, sowing seeds of disunion in New England, and threatening the sovereignty of the United States. The rationale for war against Great Britain was murky and complex, even in 1812. Eventually, historians studying the conflict looked beyond the maritime justifications and examined the more complicated reasons for the War of 1812.

Henry Adams was the first influential historian to question the importance of maritime issues. He argued that impressment was a subject the government, the press, and the American people were indifferent towards until 1811 when it became convenient for political expediency. Adams adopted the Randolphian view that territorial conquest was a contributing cause to the conflict and the key motivation for the War Hawks. “Bent on war with England, they [the War Hawks] were willing to face debt and probable bankruptcy on the chance on creating a nation, of conquering Canada, and carrying the American flag to Mobile and Key West.”<sup>9</sup>

Adams’ expansionist theory lay dormant for a time, but other historians eventually expanded upon it, most notably Lewis Hacker. Hacker could not reconcile himself to western states supporting a maritime war. He therefore argued a conquest of Canada represented “great reserves of agricultural land” for an expanding west.<sup>10</sup> D.R. Anderson also supported the idea that western states fought the War of 1812 for territorial

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<sup>9</sup> Henry Adams, *History of the United States*, 6 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1890), 6:123. For more on the importance of Henry Adams in the development of the expansion causality thesis, see Donald Hickey, “The War of 1812: Still a Forgotten Conflict?” in *Journal of Military History*, vol. 65, no. 3 (July, 2001), 741-69.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis Hacker, “Western Land Hunger and the War of 1812: A Conjecture,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 10, no. 4, (March:1924): 365-395.

gain. Anderson, however, also stressed Indian affairs. He posited that westerners led the nation to war in order to drive Britain out of North America and break Native Americans' hold in the west, thereby opening up the entire continent for settlement. "As long as the British held Canada, so long, believed the westerner . . . would Indian depredations continue; so long would obstacles remain retarding our western progress."<sup>11</sup> Edward Channing followed Anderson's lead and emphasized that the conquest of Canada was important because of Indian aggression. Channing took the argument further and stated that Southern war support rested on the desire to claim Florida, and presumably end Native American raids and stop slaves from escaping to the peninsula.<sup>12</sup>

The culmination of the land hunger thesis came with Julius Pratt's *Expansionists of 1812*. Pratt essentially combined the theories of Hacker, Anderson, and Channing. He opined that the United States was urged into war by frontier politicians, from New Hampshire to Georgia – for the dual purpose of territorial gain and the subjugation of Native Americans. According to Pratt, the United States desired Canada, but an opportunity for annexation had not presented itself previously. The South was unanimous in its yearning for Florida and in the years immediately preceding the war had begun to lust after Mexico. Republicans understood that any Northern territorial gains would be offset by corresponding Southern land acquisition. Pratt did acknowledge that the War of 1812 was possible because of the maritime grievances against Great Britain,

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<sup>11</sup> D.R. Anderson, "Insurgent of 1811," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association, 1911*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, 1913), 1:171.

<sup>12</sup> Edward Channing, *A History of the United States*, 6 vols. (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1917), 4:445-456.

but he placed the territorial aims on equal footing with impressment and Orders in Council, and viewed each as essential causes to the war.<sup>13</sup>

Even as Pratt's thesis was gaining acceptance in the historical community, George Taylor forwarded a new idea. He posed that western states supported war against Britain as a means of relieving economic hardship. The Mississippi Valley suffered a depression in the years preceding the War of 1812 as a result of Britain's Orders in Council. Prices stagnated because the European continent was closed off to American products, which in turn led to a decline in land value, hurting farmers and speculators alike. After embargo and non-importation failed to end the Orders in Council, the West embraced war as the best means to reopen continental trade and alleviate suffering.<sup>14</sup> Margaret Latimer later built on Taylor's thesis, but she focused specifically on South Carolina. Latimer viewed South Carolina's contingent in the legislature as the leading protagonists in the push for hostilities with England. The cotton boom had made South Carolina uniquely dependent on the export trade and also provided a unity among the white population that other states did not share. Everybody in South Carolina relied on cotton. When prices began to decline in 1808 and stayed depressed through 1811, South Carolinians looked for a reason. The culprit was Great Britain; the remedy was war.<sup>15</sup>

Norman Risjord took exception to both the land hunger thesis and the economic depression explanation. Risjord's two main problems with these arguments were the undue influence assigned to Western states, which only had ten House votes, and the fact

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<sup>13</sup> Julius Pratt, *Expansionists of 1812* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1925), 11-14.

<sup>14</sup> George R. Taylor, "Agrarian Discontent in the Mississippi Valley Preceding the War of 1812," *Journal of Political Economy* 39, no. 4 (August 1931), 471-505.

<sup>15</sup> Margaret Latimer, "South Carolina – A Protagonist of the War of 1812," *American Historical Review* 61, no. 4 (July 1956), 914-929.

that the War of 1812 was an economic catastrophe for the United States. Southern and Pennsylvania Republicans carried the war vote. Risjord believed that understanding the causality of the war required understanding why Republicans abandoned Jeffersonian pacifism and supported belligerence. The majority of Republicans believed that every avenue to peace with England had been exhausted and by 1812, the only options that remained for the United States were war or disgraceful submission to the tyranny of Great Britain. Risjord argued that Republicans refused to allow the nation to be shamed. “The only unifying factor, present in all sections of the country, was the growing feeling of patriotism, the realization that something must be done to vindicate the national honor.”<sup>16</sup>

Risjord’s thesis has had a major effect on the historiography of the War of 1812. The importance of national honor is acknowledged by nearly every historian who followed Risjord. Marshall Smelser is the strongest supporter of the national honor argument. In *The Democratic Republic*, Smelser echoed much of what Risjord wrote. American efforts at diplomacy failed, British depredations on the sea and in the West continued, and for the majority of the citizenry, war seemed the best option in order “to avoid permanent reduction of their country to the status of protectorate.”<sup>17</sup>

Roger Brown also offered an interpretation of the war that expanded on Risjord’s national honor thesis. Brown’s answer was that the United States engaged in conflict with Great Britain to preserve the republican experiment. British maritime depredations, the Orders in Council in particular, were an affront to American honor and threatened

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<sup>16</sup> Norman Risjord, “1812: Conservatives, War Hawks, and the Nation’s Honor,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 18, no.2 (April 1961), 196-210, quote 204.

<sup>17</sup> Marshal Smelser, *The Democratic Republic: 1801 – 1815* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 208-225, quote 224.

American sovereignty. The failure of Jeffersonian commercial restrictions left the United States with few options and the only choice that did not undermine the strength of the American republic was war. Jefferson and Madison agreed that the United States needed to demonstrate a republican government was capable of defending itself.<sup>18</sup>

The final historian to approach the War of 1812 from the national honor standpoint was Richard Buel, in closely related works, *Securing the Revolution* and *American on the Brink*. In the former work, Buel examines the ideological divergence of the Federalists and the Republicans. Both groups believed their vision of the nation's future best. Federalists believed that government should act in the best interest of the people, which is why learned gentlemen were the most fit to rule. Federalists gravitated toward Great Britain, because Alexander Hamilton and his supporters thought American security was rooted in the financial stability garnered from trade with Britain. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and fellow Republicans felt that a government was subject to the will of the people. Maintaining a strong alliance with France offered America the surest future. A close relationship with Great Britain not only undermined the Revolution, but ran counter to the public's desires. These fundamental differences dictated the course of the country.<sup>19</sup> The Republicans were able to claim and maintain power because their message resonated with more Americans. Beginning with Jefferson's embargo, however, Federalists were able to push back against Republicans. In *American on the Brink*, Buel maintains that Madison led the nation to war in 1812

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<sup>18</sup> Roger Brown, *The Republic In Peril: 1812* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1964), 177-190.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Buel, Jr., *Securing the Revolution: Ideology in American Politics, 1789-1815* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972).

because the growing Federalist minority threatened to ruin both the Republican future and the future of the republic.<sup>20</sup>

While scholars embraced the national honor thesis, it did not remain the last word on what caused the war. Reginald Horsman argued that the true reasons why the United States and Great Britain fought must be found in Europe. *The Causes of the War of 1812* spends a great deal of time establishing the importance of maritime difference between the two countries. Horsman casts the Orders in Council and impressment as fundamental problems in the Anglo-American relationship, but does not acknowledge them as causes of the war. Instead, Horsman concludes that European affairs – specifically the struggle between Great Britain and France – caused the War of 1812. Horsman channels the main Federalist argument in support of Great Britain; the British fought to preserve their very existence against Napoleon. Defeating France required Great Britain to restrict American trade and impress American seamen. Without the French-Anglo conflict, there was no War of 1812.<sup>21</sup>

Horsman's European view failed to gain much traction, although his work was well received for reemphasizing the maritime. Obviously, historians were aware that Great Britain and France were fighting a war. The United States and Great Britain were not set on an inevitable path to war, though, when the Treaty of Amiens failed in 1803. Nor did the United States act as a passive party in the antebellum period. The American government tried repeatedly to negotiate a peaceful settlement with Great Britain. When diplomacy failed, Jeffersonians unsuccessfully used embargo and non-importation to

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Buel, Jr., *America on the Brink: How the Political Struggle Over the War of 1812 Almost Destroyed the Young Republic* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Reginald Horsman, *The Causes of the War of 1812* (South Brunswick, NJ: Perpetua Books, 1962), 263-67.

coerce the British into changing their policies. In the end, the United States declared war. Great Britain was content to maintain the same unhealthy relationship with America that had existed since at least 1807. Horsman criticizes previous historians for focusing too heavily on the United States when attempting to explain what caused the War of 1812, but it was the United States who took the final step.

Three different historians – Victor Sapiro, J.C.A. Stagg, and Ronald Hatzenbuehler – argued that party loyalty led the United States to the War of 1812. Sapiro analyzed the voting habits of the Pennsylvania delegation in the House of Representatives. He concluded that the overwhelming support for the war provided by Pennsylvania stemmed primarily from loyalty to the Republican Party, in general, and the Madison administration, in particular. War against Great Britain ensured Republican preeminence in national politics.<sup>22</sup> Hatzenbuehler reached much the same conclusion as Sapiro concerning party loyalty. Hatzenbuehler used advanced statistical analyses of all House votes during the first session of the Twelfth Congress. He used his statistical findings to show that it was uncommon for a congressman to vote against his party. There was consensus among Republicans from the beginning and Hatzenbuehler argued that the declaration of war should be seen as a show of Republican Party unity.<sup>23</sup>

Hatzenbuehler revisited the conflict more thoroughly later in *Congress Declares War*, co-written with Robert Ivie. Hatzenbuehler and Ivie do not concern themselves so much with why, as how the United States went to war in 1812. The authors argue that the necessary impetus for war had been present since at least 1807, and examine what

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<sup>22</sup> Victor Sapiro, *Pennsylvania and the War of 1812* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1970), 194-98.

<sup>23</sup> Ronald Hatzenbuehler, "Party Unity and the Decision for War in the House of Representatives, 1812," *William and Mary Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (July 1972), 367-90.

made the year 1812 different. Their conclusion is that the Republican Party had created an ideal environment by 1812 for leading the nation into a conflict with Great Britain. The primary issue was that Republican leadership felt war the most viable response to tension with Britain, since every alternative had been exhausted. Madison, his Cabinet, and congressional leaders succeeded in pushing Congress into a declaration of war by exploiting party unity and justified the war through recolonization rhetoric, in which impressment played an important part.<sup>24</sup>

Stagg followed with a slightly different thesis about political unity. He posited that the need to reunify the Republicans and strengthen Madison's reelection bid motivated the conflict. The Madison administration was reeling. The Republican Party was beset by factionalism – Clintonians, Quids, the Smiths (anti-Gallatin), and various other “malcontents.” By the spring of 1811, Madison had to do something to bring his party together. His government could no longer meet British aggression with negotiation and non-importation and expect to remain in power. Madison knew war would not satisfy all Republican factions, but the majority of congressmen would return to the fold and ensure Madison a second term.<sup>25</sup> In Stagg's subsequent monograph on the War of 1812, he continues to deemphasize impressment. His most notable work, *Mr. Madison's War*, acknowledges the importance of British maritime depredations – including impressment. Stagg also remains true to his earlier argument concerning the political expediency of war. The Republican Party was fracturing, Madison faced a stiff challenge

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<sup>24</sup> Ronald Hatzenbuehler and Robert L. Ivie, *Congress Declares War: Rhetoric, Leadership, and Partisanship in the Early Republic* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1983), xii, 8-12, 23-25, 36-38, 55-57.

<sup>25</sup> J.C.A. Stagg, “James Madison and the ‘Malcontents’: The Political Origins of the War of 1812,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (Oct. 1976), 557-85.

from DeWitt Clinton in the 1812 presidential election, and Madison viewed war as the surest answer to both his foreign and domestic troubles. The War of 1812, “can best be understood as Madison’s response to long-term diplomatic and political problems that had beset his administration since 1809.”<sup>26</sup>

The next phase in analyses of war causality was a more inclusive approach, first taken by Bradford Perkins. Although he viewed the conflict as part of “the American search for national respectability and true independence from Europe,” Perkins favored a more balanced perspective. He considered maritime issues, particularly Orders in Council, as the most legitimate cause for war, but Indian affairs, political expediency, and national honor all figured the mix. Perkins’ most unique contribution was to include a heightened sense of “national pride, sensitivity, and frustration” on the part of both the United States and Great Britain as a major war cause. American Anglophobia and British contempt for the United States undermined diplomatic relations and ensured that even minor slights were viewed as terrible insults.<sup>27</sup> Years later, Donald Hickey followed Perkins lead and offered a synthesis of theories as an explanation. War was the answer for all that ailed the Republicans. A conflict with Great Britain could potentially end impressment and Orders in Council, quell the Indians, vindicate American independence, preserve national honor, uphold republicanism as a legitimate form of government, strengthen the Republican Party, and weaken the Federalists.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> J.C.A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison’s War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783-1830* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 3-47.

<sup>27</sup> Bradford Perkins, *Prologue to War: 1805-1812* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1970), vii-viii, 418-437, quotes vii.

<sup>28</sup> Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict, Bicentennial Edition* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 5-47.

The role of impressment in the various explanations for war is muddled. Few of the historians mentioned above dismiss impressment entirely. Scholars more commonly minimize the issue's importance. For example, Roger Brown calls impressment "a less serious evil" because it was "an issue that had dragged on intermittently since 1793 without provoking hostilities."<sup>29</sup> (Clearly Brown does not consider the *Chesapeake-Leopard* incident or *President-Little Belt* as hostile actions.) Meanwhile, J.C.A. Stagg believes that "Orders in Council must be given priority in any explanation of the coming of the war" and dismisses impressment as a nonissue after 1807.<sup>30</sup> Even those historians who accept the important role of mariner abductions in pushing the US and Great Britain to war do not bother discussing the issue in any depth. Bradford Perkins' commanding study, *Prologue of War*, only seriously addresses the issue twice, although he does mention impressment intermittently throughout the text.<sup>31</sup> The problem is not that historians ignore impressment; the problem is that they acknowledge and then dismiss impressment.

Even among the small community of historians who intensely study impressment, there is no consensus. Scott Thomas Jackson wrote on the role of impressment in Anglo-American diplomacy. He concluded that Madison had little or no interest in impressed seamen. Jackson believed that impressment had been collectively placed on the "back burner" after the Embargo. Madison revived the plight of captive seamen as propaganda

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<sup>29</sup> Brown, *Republic in Peril*, 21.

<sup>30</sup> Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War*, 557.

<sup>31</sup> The first time Perkins addresses impressment is in the context of international relations, together with a discussion of the number of incidents. The second occurrence is when Perkins details the Monroe-Pinkney negotiations and the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair. He does not seriously address the issue again until the concluding chapter. Perkins, *Prologue to War*, 84-95, 125-137.

in 1812 to convince the public that war with Great Britain was both more necessary and more justified than war with France.<sup>32</sup>

Claire Phelan argues in her dissertation that Republicans showed little interest in finding a solution to the impressment controversy. Phelan acknowledges continued anger among the American populace over British manstealing, but she is unable to recognize the importance of impressment in helping cause the war. In Phelan's view, "there appears little convincing evidence that [impressment] elicited more than sporadic though angrily worded, letters between the two countries in the last few years before the conflict." Instead Phelan views the conflict as part of a Republican effort to repair national pride in the wake of the *Chesapeake* affair.<sup>33</sup>

Scott Thomas Jackson and Claire Phelan offer flawed arguments. They both minimize the importance of impressment as a reason for war because of the lack of diplomatic communication on the subject. After 1808, the United States and Great Britain reached an impasse on negotiating an end to impressment. Madison redirected his administration's diplomacy to focus on the Orders in Council. The abduction of American seamen did not cease to matter because American and British ministers spoke less about press gangs. The anger and frustration caused by British seizures of American seafarers remained strong. Madison did not need to revive American discontent over impressment in 1812 – it never faded.

In juxtaposition to Jackson and Phelan, sits Denver Brunzman. Brunzman focuses primarily on the tensions caused by manstealing during the American colonial period. He

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<sup>32</sup> Scott Thomas Jackson, "Impressment and Anglo-American Discord, 1787-1818," PhD Dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1976, 310-57.

<sup>33</sup> Claire Phelan, "In the Vice of Empire: British Impressment of the American Sailor," PhD Dissertation, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas, 2008, 178-202, quote 201.

does address impressment's destructiveness in Anglo-American affairs post-independence, though. Brunsman concludes that impressment was extremely important in solidifying early American nationalism and had to be a driving force behind the war effort in 1812. If impressment was truly a non-issue, or a convenient propaganda piece, then the war would have ended before it began with the withdrawal of the Orders in Council.<sup>34</sup>

The bicentennial of the War of 1812 has brought a renewed interest in the study of the conflict. The latest monographs on the war repeatedly address impressment. The majority of newer historians are unwilling to dismiss the importance of abducted American seamen, even if they do not dwell overly long on the issue. Alan Taylor, in his unique *The Civil War of 1812*, offers a succinct, yet accurate appraisal of the impressment controversy. The United States and Great Britain had fundamentally divergent value systems regarding citizenship, which heightened tensions between the two nations, helping to plunge them into war. Unlike many of his predecessors, Taylor does argue that impressment shrank in importance after the *Chesapeake* affair. Instead he notes: "An irritant before 1803, the impressments of Americans soared thereafter . . . During the next eight years, the British probably impressed ten thousand men who claimed American citizenship."<sup>35</sup>

Likewise Paul Gilje stresses the importance of citizenship in the United States, where men (or seamen) were free to choose which flag they served under in his *Free Trade and Sailors' Rights*. Gilje argues that impressment "challenged the rights of

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<sup>34</sup> Denver Brunsman, "The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World," PhD Dissertation, Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey (2004), 360-69.

<sup>35</sup> Allan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 101-23, quote 105.

Americans and therefore challenged the American national identity.” Western and southern territorial expansion, along with a fear of Native Americans, and a need to uphold national honor also figures heavily into Gilje’s explanation of why the war was fought. He is a proponent of the Hickey school of thought that Madison and supporters believed a war with Great Britain in 1812 offered a remedy to all the nation’s ills. As the Anglo-American crisis worsened, impressment became an important rallying point for the American public and together with free trade “the issue became the major explanation for the War of 1812.”<sup>36</sup> Taylor and Gilje correctly position these questions of identity in the larger context of individual rights in the Age of Revolution.

Other recent works are less sympathetic concerning the impressment of American seamen. Nicole Eustace, in *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism*, fails to fully embrace the importance of impressment. Perhaps this is because Eustace starts her work with the declaration of war. Her attitude towards impressment also stems from her failure to explore the issue any deeper than through a handful of broadside ballads. She insists on viewing impressment as propagandized romanticism used to disguise the real war aim of western expansion. Her interpretation only works, however, by ignoring mountains of evidence that predates any sort of need on the part of America’s pro-war faction to invigorate the public. Eustace ignores the fact that forced service in the British navy was a real issue confronting a large portion of the American public that had been consistently protested since 1793 – protests that included broadside ballads.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Gilje, *Free Trade and Sailors’ Right*, 99-110, 125-96, quotes 99 & 172.

<sup>37</sup> Nicole Eustace, *1812: War and the Passions of Patriotism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 78-117.

Troy Bickham's pro-British interpretation of impressment offers little new. In *The Weight of Vengeance*, an otherwise compelling work on the British perspective of the war, Bickham relies almost solely on secondary sources when assessing the seriousness of seaman abductions. He posits that the Royal Navy successfully recovered 7000 English sailors from American merchant ships and regurgitates tired arguments about similarities in Englishmen and Americans, as well as the simplicity of gaining a seaman's protection. Although Bickham does concede that impressment was a violation of American rights and regressed the United States to a semi-colonial state, Bickham firmly concludes that the true cause of the war was the Republicans' desire to acquire more land, particularly upper-Canada.<sup>38</sup>

Even the two most important, recent syntheses on nineteenth century American history offer vastly different interpretations on impressment. Gordon Wood, in his exhaustive work on the early republic, *Empire of Liberty*, takes a rather Federalist view of the practice. The Royal Navy needed seamen and American merchant vessels acted as a haven for British sailors. Wood acknowledges the anger in the United States caused by impressment, but confesses that in his view, such a passionate response made little sense. "The practice did not endanger the American's national security, nor . . . threaten the existence of their navy or their merchant fleet." Finally, Wood falls into the common trap of dismissing impressment as a cause of war because of overwhelming Southern support, arguing that seaman abductions and maritime rights did not affect the Southern states.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Troy Bickham, *The Weight of Vengeance: The United States, the British Empire, and the War of 1812* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 31-36, 42-48.

Sean Wilentz, in contrast, pronounces impressment the worst of Britain's offenses against the United States. *The Rise of American Democracy* adopts the basics of the national honor thesis. Great Britain, aided by the Federalist minority in America, continually provoked the United States. James Madison, far from being dragged into the conflict by Republican war-hawks, was so frustrated with Britain that he was as ready for war as anybody. Wilentz even offers a counterpoint to the commonly held belief that, had Madison learned sooner about Parliament's repeal of the Orders in Council, the war would have been averted. "Even had the news arrived earlier, however, pro-war Republicans might have considered a one-year suspension of the Orders too little, too late."<sup>40</sup>

The War of 1812 was not monocausal. There were a multitude of reasons for hostilities between the United States and Great Britain. The importance of impressment is not lessened because other factors were in play. This chapter examines the role impressment played as the Madison administration and the Twelfth Congress considered, prepared, and finally, declared war on Great Britain. Madison clarified the importance of impressment at the beginning of his war preparations, many congressmen concurred with the President, as did a majority of state legislatures, prominent newspapers across the country, and the American citizenry. Impressment was vital in the decision for war.

Relations between the United States and Great Britain did not begin on a strong footing in 1811. In January, William Pinkney, minister plenipotentiary to Great Britain,

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<sup>39</sup> Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 642-60, quote 643.

<sup>40</sup> Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2005), 154-176, quote 155.

announced that he was leaving his post. A charge d'affairs was Pinkney's replacement. Great Britain had been without a minister to the United States since November 1809 when President Madison declared George Rose *persona non grata*. Pinkney cited this inequality in Anglo-American diplomacy as the reason for his resignation. The Prince Regent hoped to induce Pinkney to stay by quickly naming Augustus Foster as Britain's new minister to the United States. Pinkney pushed for more. Madison accepted Napoleon's vague November withdrawal of the Berlin and Milan Decrees, but the Perceval Ministry refused to repeal the Orders in Council. The United States prepared a new round of non-importation against Great Britain to start in February 1812, as per Macon's Bill No. 2. Non-importation failed to move the Perceval government toward withdrawing Britain's trade restrictions. Pinkney attempted to win concessions from the Perceval Ministry on the Orders in Council or impressment by bargaining his presence in London, but failed. Pinkney's last communications from Lord Wellesley, the Foreign Secretary, convinced Pinkney that his mission was futile. On March 1, William Pinkney took his leave as minister plenipotentiary.<sup>41</sup> He voiced his frustration to Robert Smith, Madison's Secretary of State, "To mistake the views of [Perceval's] Government is now impossible. They are such as I have always believe them to be and will, I hope, be resisted with spirit and firmness."<sup>42</sup> President Madison shared Pinkney's view that the time for resistance was approaching. In the spring, Madison began to lay the foundation for more aggressive action against Great Britain.

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<sup>41</sup> William Pinkney to Lord Wellesley, 7 January 1811; Pinkney to Robert Smith, 11 February 1811; Pinkney to Wellesley, 17 February 1811; Pinkney to Smith, 18 February 1811, *American State Papers*, Series 1, Foreign Relations 3:411-14.

<sup>42</sup> Pinkney to Smith, 24 February 1811, *ASP: Foreign Relations* 3:414.

On April 13, 1811, James Madison dined with Joseph Gales, the editor of the *National Intelligencer* – the administration’s unofficial newspaper. Three days later Gales published an editorial on the state of Anglo-American relations based on the contents of his conversation with Madison. The article was pessimistic. Madison, through Gales, lamented that the Prince Regent seemed intent on continuing England’s belligerence towards the United States. The President saw little hope that amicable relations could be restored. Great Britain needed to meet “three great preliminary points of adjustment” in order to appease the United States. The first issue was “to abandon the practice of impressing whosoever her commander chuse to call British seamen”; the second, to alter the blockade system; the third, to revoke the orders in council. The consequences for failing to adhere to these conditions were vague, but included rigorous enforcement of non-importation, or “some measure more consonant to the feelings of the nation.”<sup>43</sup>

Madison was unenthusiastic regarding the prospects for success in future negotiations with Great Britain. He expected little from Augustus Foster. The President confided to Thomas Jefferson that British diplomacy amounted to nothing more than “delay and delusion” and suspected the “mission of Foster . . . plays at the same game.”<sup>44</sup> In preparation for Foster’s arrival, however, Madison made a major cabinet change. He replaced Robert Smith with James Monroe as Secretary of State.

Madison and Smith were not friends, but their political alliance helped overcome their personal differences. The two men could not surmount their conflicting views on Napoleon’s repeal of the Berlin and Milan Decrees, though. Madison accepted

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<sup>43</sup> “Our Relations with G. Britain,” *National Intelligencer*, 16 April 1811.

<sup>44</sup> James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, 19 April 1811, letter, *PJM, Pres. Series*, 3:270.

Napoleon's repeal at face value to give the United States a position of strength in dealing with Great Britain. Smith could not or would not perceive the value in maintaining such a view. James Monroe was more inclined to support Madison's position.<sup>45</sup>

There were other factors in play, as well. Monroe came close to negotiating a treaty with Great Britain in 1806. He failed to reach an accommodation on impressment, which killed the Monroe-Pinkney treaty, but he brought valuable diplomatic experience to the table. In addition, Monroe had been Madison's chief rival for the Republican presidential nomination in 1808 – bringing Monroe and his supporters into the administration fold removed the greatest threat to Madison's second term. Finally, Monroe was genuinely interested in reaching an accommodation with England. As he explained to Madison: "I was sincerely of the opinion . . . that it was for the interest of our country, to make an accommodation with England. . . . I have since seen no cause to doubt its soundness. Circumstances have in some respects changed, but still my general views of policy are the same."<sup>46</sup> Thus while Madison doubted the sincerity of Foster's mission, he placed diplomacy in the hands of an experienced man who believed peace was the best course for the United States.

President Madison's pessimism concerning negotiations was well founded. Foster arrived in Washington, D.C., at the beginning of July. The British envoy made it clear that he was not going to discuss the Orders in Council. Perceval did not consider the Berlin and Milan decrees repealed, negating Macon's Bill, and placing no pressure on

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<sup>45</sup> James Madison to Robert Smith, 17 April 1811, letter, *The Papers of James Madison*, General Correspondence, Library of Congress online collection.

<sup>46</sup> James Monroe to James Madison, 23 March 1811, letter, *PJM, Pres. Series*, 3:230.

Great Britain to withdraw the Orders.<sup>47</sup> Negotiations went so poorly that Madison and Monroe retired to their Virginia estates at the end of July and Foster traveled to Philadelphia, halting all diplomatic discussion until the fall.

Impressment was not discussed during the July talks between Monroe and Foster. The silence from the administration on such an important question speaks volumes. President Madison hoped to preserve peace with Great Britain. Seaman abductions previously proved the largest obstacle to a treaty. Impressment was the thorniest issue to resolve of the three adjustments Madison outlined as being necessary for peace. An agreement on blockades and the Orders in Council would exhibit a willingness on the part of Great Britain to deal with the United States in an honest manner. A repeal of the Orders in Council, in particular, could demonstrate enough progress for Madison to avoid hostilities while negotiations on impressment continued. (In February, Representative Robert Wright recommended that a settlement on impressment be made a proviso to any agreement with Britain, but he found little support for his proposal.)<sup>48</sup> Despite the setbacks of the summer, Madison instructed Monroe, “it is best to pursue a steady course of fairness and truth towards that Govt. [Great Britain].”<sup>49</sup> Madison did not want to obstruct any chance for peace by discussing impressment too early.

The White House chose a silent approach to seaman abductions in the summer of 1811, but around the country outrage with the practice was growing once more. “The impressment of our seamen, the murder of our citizens, and the violation of our flag and

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<sup>47</sup> See the exchange of letters between Augustus Foster and James Monroe from July 1811, *ASP: FR* 3:435-445.

<sup>48</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 11<sup>th</sup> Cong., 3<sup>rd</sup> sess., 998-99.

<sup>49</sup> James Madison to James Monroe, letter, 11 August 1811, *PJM, Pres. Series*, 3:413.

territory by Great Britain, are outrages of so flagrant a character, that they would justify, and if persisted in, must inevitably terminate in war,” declared a meeting of the Republican citizens of Norfolk County, Massachusetts.<sup>50</sup> From Philadelphia, William Duane ratcheted up his vitriolic prose in the *Aurora General Advertiser*, calling impressment, “the worst of all conditions of human slavery, it is the consummation of tyranny and degradation.”<sup>51</sup> Duane favored war with Britain, in large part because of impressment. He reminded his readers of the “daily trembling and gnashing of teeth, when the news of impressed citizens or the echoes of their groans from the holds of British men of war are heard.”<sup>52</sup> Meanwhile, the Tammany Society of Brookhaven, Long Island, petitioned President Madison regarding their support for hostilities with Great Britain. “The ocean has been constantly infested by her piratical forces. . . . By them our people have been murdered – our property seized and condemned, *our Seamen impressed and enslaved*, our sovereignty invaded and our Government openly vilified and insulted.” The United States had to employ force to avenge the wrongs committed by England. “Justice has in reality been stricken from the Catalogue of their virtues,” the Tammany Society concluded.<sup>53</sup>

In the South, citizens of Goochland County, Virginia, gathered at the county court house to celebrate Independence Day. They offered seventeen toasts, the tenth of which concerned impressment: “Recognized *only* by the tyrant of the Ocean, the spirit of a free and Independent Government should never brook the injuries and insults consequent to

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<sup>50</sup> “Spirit of the Times!,” *Boston Patriot*, 26 July 1811.

<sup>51</sup> *Aurora General Advertiser*, 31 July 1811.

<sup>52</sup> “War With England,” *Weekly Aurora*, 13 August 1811.

<sup>53</sup> Tammany Society of Brookhaven, Long Island, New York to James Madison, letter, 21 October 1811, *PJM: Pres. Series*, 3:496.

its exercises.”<sup>54</sup> (The previous toast had saluted the Constitution and the subsequent toast Commodore John Rodgers. Thus, the people of Goochland praised the document that guaranteed the freedoms of American citizens, condemned the British practice that threatened those freedoms, and lauded the Navy officer who had struck back at British aggression.) An editorial in the Kentucky newspaper, *Palladium*, called “the question of impressment, if not the most, at least of as much importance as any in the long list of complaints we have against the British government. We hope the period is at no great distance when a categorical answer will be required of the British nation, as to this manifest violation of every principle of law or justice.”<sup>55</sup> Finally, inhabitants of the Illinois Territory pledged to support Madison “in this portentous dilemma now before us” brought about by Great Britain’s, “unwarrantable aggressions and unprecedented depredations . . . repeatedly made on our neutral rights, in the sequestrations and impressments.”<sup>56</sup>

While Madison vacillated on his future course during his summer hiatus, respected colleagues urged definitive action. Revolutionary War hero Henry “Lighthorse Harry” Lee implored the President: “A continuance in the present state of half war, is of all others the most debasing to the national character. . . . Take us out of this odious condition by restoration of amity, or by drawing the sword.” Lee believed it was in the nation’s best interest for Madison to seize the initiative. “It is better to fight our way to future peace, than to drag on in this state of disputation and irritation, which must lead to

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<sup>54</sup> *Richmond Enquirer*, 12 July 1811.

<sup>55</sup> “British Aggression,” *Palladium*, 21 September 1811.

<sup>56</sup> The Inhabitants of St. Clair County, Illinois Territory to James Madison, letter, 6 September 1811, *PJM: Pres. Series*, 3:446.

war & perhaps at a period not so favorable as the present moment.”<sup>57</sup> The Louisiana Territory’s governor, William C.C. Claiborne, was a longtime political ally, and he warned Madison, “a crisis will soon arrive, when we must make war, or abandon our rights as a nation.”<sup>58</sup>

By the autumn of 1811, there was clearly a martial spirit gripping parts of the nation, motivated by the ongoing aggression of the Royal Navy. Madison preferred peace, but he prepared for the possibility of war. Madison called the Twelfth Congress to session a month early in order to deliver his annual message. He detailed the current state of American foreign affairs, focusing especially on the tensions in Anglo-American relations. The speech concluded with a call for Congress to strengthen the national defenses. The President did not mention impressment explicitly in his address, although he did state that “our coasts and the mouths of our harbors have again witnessed scenes not less derogatory to the dearest of our national rights than vexation to the regular course of our trade.”<sup>59</sup> Madison also detailed and justified the clash between the *President* and the *Little Belt*, an incident the American public closely associated with the abduction of John Diggio.

James Madison only obliquely touched on impressment in his Annual Address, but those supporting the President’s call for military preparedness had no qualms emphasizing captive seamen. The House of Representatives assigned its Foreign Relations Committee to draft the official response to the President’s speech. The committee’s report was ready by the end of November. Peter Porter, Democratic

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<sup>57</sup> Henry Lee to James Madison, letter, 19 August 1811, *PJM: Pres. Series*, 3:424.

<sup>58</sup> William C.C. Claiborne to James Madison, letter, 8 October 1811, *Ibid.*, 3:479.

<sup>59</sup> Message to Congress, memorandum, 4 November 1811, *Ibid.*, 4:1-5.

Republican from western New York, presented the findings. The committee echoed the sentiments of Madison, but also strongly rebuked the British for continuing to press American seamen “with unabated rigor and severity.” Porter argued that if Congress had a duty to protect property from British seizures, the legislature had a greater obligation to protect the liberty of American citizens from the same. He concluded, “We must now tamely and quietly submit, or we must resist by those means which God has placed within our reach.”<sup>60</sup>

Congress approved a series of defense measures over the next month that generally corresponded with Madison’s recommendations. Representatives debated every resolution, however, and the legitimacy of war with Great Britain was repeatedly questioned. Congressmen urging military preparedness championed the measures, in large part, because of impressment. Felix Gundy, Richard M. Johnson, John C. Calhoun, and Joseph Desha were the “War Hawks” to cite the Royal Navy press as a principal justification for war. The strongest arguments made in favor of fighting on behalf of captives sailors came from elsewhere, though.

North Carolina congressman William King argued against Federalist suggestions that war with Great Britain was unwise because the Royal Navy protected the United States from Napoleonic despotism. King railed, “Let the voice of our impressed seamen, torn from their homes, their wives, their families, speak their protection!” He asked, “Is it consistent with that independence we profess to maintain, to submit without a struggle to that annihilation of the liberties of those hardy sons of their country? . . . They are our brothers, they are entitled to the same privileges, the same protection.”<sup>61</sup> The senior

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<sup>60</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 12<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 374-76, quote 376.

representative in Congress, William Findley from Greensburg, Pennsylvania, chastised his reluctant colleagues. “The time is fast approaching when we must repel national insult or surrender our independence. [I say] this particularly with respect to the impressment of our seamen.” Findley reminded the House that when Britain began detaining Americans, the outrage was universal, but time had blunted those sentiments among some of his colleagues. “The impressment of our seamen, admitted by all to be a justifiable cause of war, has never been relinquished.”<sup>62</sup> Robert Wright of Maryland made the strongest argument that the forced labor of Columbia’s tars was reason enough for war.

Wright had long campaigned for stronger measures to protect seamen and deter British press gangs. He previously proposed making impressment aboard an American vessel punishable by death and placing a bounty on Royal Navy officers and seamen who participated in the practice. In a lengthy speech advocating war, Wright called the taking of American seamen “a stroke at the vitals of liberty itself.” He wondered how any man could not feel “bound to avenge the slavery and death of American impressed seamen.” Wright articulated the many obligations due the “honest tar” and warned his contemporaries, “if these outrages, which cry aloud for vengeance, do not animate you, I fear the sacred fire that inspired your fathers in the Revolution is nearly extinguished and the liberty of their degenerate sons in jeopardy.”<sup>63</sup> Findley and Wright were concerned by the growing indifference in the national legislature toward the plight of captive sailors, but in the general public their anxiety was baseless. Although there were congressmen

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 519-20.

<sup>62</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 12<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 501

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 467-69

who would not recognize impressment as *casus bellum*, an increasing number of Americans rallied behind the nation's seamen.

State legislatures across the country passed resolutions supporting the Madison administration and condemning Great Britain. The taking of American tars featured prominently in these motions. The New Jersey Assembly declared that, "the abominable practice of impressing native American seamen . . . forcing them aboard their ships of war and compelling them, under the lash to fight," produced "no doubt, or hesitation on the mind" that war against Britannia was just.<sup>64</sup> Kentucky state leaders believed a war necessary to preserve the nation's self-respect. England was "forcibly imprisoning and torturing our fellow-citizens; condemning some to death – slaughtering others, by . . . impressing our seamen to man her vessels. Should we tamely submit, the world ought to despise us – We should despise ourselves."<sup>65</sup> Other states added their official censure of impressment as well; Ohio, Virginia, both Carolinas, New Hampshire, Vermont, Georgia, and Maryland. Mississippi Territory followed suit.<sup>66</sup> The Pennsylvania General Assembly produced the most radical criticism of British aggression, though. Keystone state politicians agreed that British tyranny on the high seas – impressment particularly – "cannot but rouse the virtuous indignation of every friend to this Country and its Government" and must be resisted, and suggested reprisals for seamen's suffering. The Pennsylvania legislature proposed that, "for every impressed American Citizen, to seize a

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<sup>64</sup> Legislature of New Jersey, House of Assembly to James Madison, 13 January 1812, *PJM:Pres. Series*, 4:145-46.

<sup>65</sup> The Kentucky State Legislature to James Madison, 13 January 1812, *Ibid.*, 4:130.

<sup>66</sup> The General Assembly of the State of Ohio to James Madison, 26 December 1811, *Ibid.*, 4:114; *Annals of Congress*, 12<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1012; "Approval of the Measures of the Federal Government by North Carolina," *American State Papers, Miscellaneous*, 2:168; *Annals of Congress*, 12<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1042; "Approval of the Measures of the Federal Government by Mississippi Territory," *ASP: Misc.*, 2:168.

subject of His Britannic Majesty, wherever such subject can be found, and subject him to impressment and labour, corresponding to the condition of the impressed American on board a British ship of war.”<sup>67</sup> The majority of state assemblies in the country, deemed detained American seamen sufficient cause for war with Great Britain.

The State Department’s report on impressment provided even more evidence of the practice’s severity. On January 16, 1812, in compliance with a congressional resolution from the previous November, James Monroe submitted all the information concerning captive American seamen received by his department since April 1810. Monroe’s report indicated that between 1803 and September 1811, at least 6,257 sailors had applied for liberation from impressment through the London office for the relief of impressed seamen.<sup>68</sup> Congressman Robert Wright responded to the report by introducing a bill in the House of Representatives similar to the one he had presented to the Senate in 1806. Wright’s new bill was only slightly less radical than what he had proposed six years earlier. Among the provisions, impressment would be declared a form of piracy and any man caught practicing it would be put to death. An American seaman could justifiably defend himself from impressment by killing or maiming those attempting to seize him. The president would be authorized to seize British subjects equal in number to impressed Americans and hold the Britons as cartel to exchange.<sup>69</sup> Wright’s bill received

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<sup>67</sup> Resolutions of the General Assembly of Pennsylvania, 20 December 1811, *PJM: Pres. Series*, 4:80-81.

<sup>68</sup> James Madison, *Message from the President of the United States Transmitting a Report From the Secretary of State on the Subject of Impressments, In Obedience to a Resolution From the House of Representatives* (Washington, DC: A & G Way, Printers, 1812).

<sup>69</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 12<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1343-45.

three readings on the House floor, but in the end proved too drastic for many of his fellow congressmen.<sup>70</sup>

Monroe's report may have failed to generate a passionate reaction from Congress, but Republican newspapers responded to it with unconstrained rage. William Duane, of the *Aurora General Advertiser*, already advocated for decisive action by Congress on behalf of incarcerated sailors. Monroe's report gave Duane even more ammunition. In issue after issue through February and March, Duane displayed in large, bold print the number "6,257." He explained how Monroe's figure affected the public mood in Philadelphia regarding impressment: "At no point within our recollection has the discontent of the great mass of the community been so great or so manifest; it has indeed overcome all the accustomed bounds of party, and produced a unity of opinion seldom seen in a popular government in the absence of war."<sup>71</sup> Duane also employed the statistic to criticize Congress's lethargy: "When the number of American citizens impressed is considered, and the cruel indifference betrayed by congress to their condition is considered, how can any man believe that there is honor, or spirit, or justice enough to assert any right, or redress any other wrong."<sup>72</sup> While Duane used the *Aurora* to advocate for stronger measures against Great Britain, he had little hope that anything would be done on the seamen's behalf. "It seems that the American seamen might as well complain to the passing wind," he lamented, "as to the representatives of this free and independent republic, for that justice and protection for which he is entitled."<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *Aurora General Advertiser*, 24 February 1812.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 11 March 1812.

<sup>73</sup> "6257," *Aurora General Advertiser*, 18 April 1812.

Not all editors were as pessimistic as Duane. Countless newspapers cited the State Department report on impressed seamen as evidence that war with Great Britain was necessary. The *Baltimore Whig* argued that England “has kidnapped thousands of American citizens, continues to kidnap others and to hold them in the most galling and ignominious bondage. Were there no other cause of war than this grievance – it is all too sufficient.”<sup>74</sup> After the British impressed three more Baltimore seamen, the *Baltimore Sun* demanded, “When will congress awake from their apathy and avenge the wrongs of our injured tars?”<sup>75</sup> In Boston, *The Yankee* branded impressment “a just *cause* of WAR” but warned, “so long as we remain passive we deprive ourselves of every possible excuse to our citizens, who have become the victims to this barbarous abuse of power.”<sup>76</sup> The *Albany Register* believed that the Madison administration should declare the decks of American ships an extension of American soil and every act of impressment aboard a United States vessel an act of war. (In fact, Madison had been arguing that very point for years.) “And if our government will not declare war to maintain this principle,” concluded the *Register*, “and the country will not support them in it, then both government and country deserve to be annihilated – and to this every honest heart – every man who is not a traitor – will say AMEN.”<sup>77</sup>

Finally, in the wake of Monroe’s report to Congress, the *National Intelligencer* printed a series of five letters from the “Ghost of Montgomery” titled “Impressed Seamen, No. I -V.” Montgomery hoped to “detail a few particulars relating to this

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<sup>74</sup> “England and France,” *Baltimore Whig*, 10 May 1812.

<sup>75</sup> “6257! More Manstealing,” *Baltimore Sun*, 15 April 1812.

<sup>76</sup> “Worse,” *The Yankee*, 13 March 1812.

<sup>77</sup> “Impressed Seamen,” *The Albany Register*, 3 March 1812.

important object of national concern.”<sup>78</sup> The pseudonym referred to Richard Montgomery, the British soldier turned Revolutionary War general who died a martyr during the assault on Quebec in 1775. American patriots commonly used the image of Montgomery’s ghost during the Revolution. Thomas Paine most famously employed the spirit in his pamphlet, *A Dialogue Between the Ghost of General Montgomery Just Arrived from the Elysian Fields and an American Delegate in a Wood Near Philadelphia*. In Paine’s work, Montgomery’s ghost returned to Earth to warn a member of the Continental Congress against accommodation with Great Britain. Independence was the only solution to hostilities with England.<sup>79</sup> By 1812, Thomas Paine was dead, but the symbolic importance of Richard Montgomery continued on. On the pages of the *National Intelligencer*, the ghost of Montgomery revisited the United States to implore that independence be maintained.

The first and second letters outlined what impressed Americans experienced in the Royal Navy. The letters also criticized British hypocrisy. (The Ghost of Montgomery used his spectral form to actually visit the seamen and observe their oppressed conditions.) The third article offered a remedy for impressed seamen: “Desertion, mutiny, and gunpowder, are the weapons of freemen kept in slavery.” The writer also proposed that the national course of action should be war: “The object of war is peace – ours, justice, indemnity for the past and assurance of respect for the future . . . if then we are compelled to the dire alternative of war, provision should be made for the

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<sup>78</sup> “Impressed Seamen, No. 1,” *National Intelligencer*, 10 March 1812.

<sup>79</sup> Thomas Paine, *A Dialogue Between the Ghost of General Montgomery Just Arrived from the Elysian Fields and an American Delegate in a Wood Near Philadelphia*, in *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, 2 vols., (New York: G.P. Putnum and Sons, 1906), 1:161-67.

heirs of those who thus die martyrs of their country.”<sup>80</sup> The fourth piece strongly advocated that in the event of hostilities, the United States should incite mutiny aboard British men of war by offering land bounties and monetary rewards to all participating seamen. The last letter urged preventative procedures for the future to ensure the cessation of impressment. The measures advocated by the Ghost of Montgomery included retaliation against British subjects living in the United States, the prohibition forever of any British man-of-war with impressed American citizens serving aboard, and the tarring and feathering of any officer from a vessel who impressed an American for up to seven years after a general peace with Great Britain.<sup>81</sup> Since the *National Intelligencer* was the semi-official organ of the Madison administration, the publication of the Impressed Seamen letters carried added significance. It is unlikely that Giles would have printed the essays advocating open violence and war against Great Britain in retaliation for impressment if that did not reflect a degree of shared sentiment with the administration.

Lest any Americans forget the suffering of their seamen, in the late winter and early spring a bevy of letters from impressed individuals found their way into James Madison’s hands. The president permitted them to be read on the floor of the Congress, and printed in papers from Maine to Georgia. James Brown was a veteran of the United States Navy, but his discharge papers and his protection were not enough to stop the British from hauling him aboard the frigate *Proteus*. Brown penned a letter to President Madison explaining his disappointed dealings with British authorities: “They did not

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<sup>80</sup> “Impressed Seamen, No. 3,” *National Intelligencer*, 17 March 1812.

<sup>81</sup> “Impressed Seamen, No. 4,” *National Intelligencer*, 21 March 1812; “Impressed Seamen, No. 5,” *National Intelligencer*, 24 March 1812.

think fit to admit of my Discharge without more sufficient proofs of my Citizenship, which obliges me to think they have acted entirely contrary to the character of Honorable Gentlemen, which they always stile themselves.”<sup>82</sup> Shortly thereafter, Madison received another letter from John Decker and James Campbell, impressed and suffering aboard HMS *Voluntaire*.<sup>83</sup>

Meanwhile in Congress, Jonathan Coleman’s plea for government interdiction received two readings on the House floor. Coleman was a native of Newark, New Jersey, and had served aboard the USS *Chesapeake* under both James Barron and Stephen Decatur. Coleman deplored his station, “I am for to be held in the Service as an English man Made for to fight for another country than My own Against my own will.”<sup>84</sup> Immediately following the presentation of Jonathan Coleman’s petition on the House floor, New Hampshire Representative Samuel Dismoor read letters from his constituents, Lemuel and Ruth Fling. The Royal Navy had impressed the Flings’ son, Calvin, during his extended visit to Quebec. Lemuel Fling was a veteran of the Revolution, and explained to Dinsmoor, “I did much for my country in the revolutionary war . . . I had my hearing much injured, and it has grown so much worse . . . but I never applied to government for assistance.” Lemuel needed government assistance for his son, though. “If my son can be released we shall much rejoice and be very thankful to government.” While Lemuel flourished his status as a veteran to further his son’s case, Ruth Fling

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<sup>82</sup> James Brown to James Madison, letter, 17 January 1812, *PJM: Pres. Series*, 4:138.

<sup>83</sup> John Decker and James Campbell to James Madison, letter, 31 January 1812, *Ibid.*, 4:158.

<sup>84</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 12<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1278; Jonathan Coleman to the House of Representatives, 14 December 1811, letter, Jonathan Coleman file, Entry 928 letters of impressed seamen, Records relating to impressed seamen, 1794-1815, Miscellaneous Records, General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59, National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland.

exhibited maternal ardor: “The tender poignant feelings of a bereaved mother forbid silence . . . Let all who are not callous to every tender human feeling, guess at how a fond mother must feel, what anguish must wring her heart, on having a beloved son . . . in a state of servitude, awful and dangerous.” Ruth begged that Dinsmoor use his influence to secure Calvin’s release before her worst nightmares came to pass. “Sometimes I fancy my son is compelled to point the engines of death against the bosom of his own countrymen. At others, imagination presents him dead, and sunk in the mighty waters to be food for the monsters of the deep.”<sup>85</sup> In response to the petitions of Coleman and the Flings, the House established a special committee of five members to investigate the possibility of securing the seamen’s releases.<sup>86</sup>

Newspapers also ran numerous stories about impressed seamen and published correspondence from captive sailors and their families. The *Aurora General Advertiser* printed many such letters, including one from Presley A. Vanwinkle. “You can’t think of the agitation of mind that I am in, since I have been in bondage,” Vanwinkle wrote to his mother. He longed to see her again “this side of eternity, if not, we shall meet in the world to come, where parting is no more. My heart is broke, but still I live in hopes.”<sup>87</sup> The *Savannah Republican* reported about the impressment of Samuel Johnston on a voyage from New York to Savannah, while the *Eastern Argus* (Portland, Maine) ran a letter from David Davies, captive aboard HMS *Aboukir*.<sup>88</sup> The *Essex Register* printed a

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<sup>85</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 12<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1297; *Niles Weekly Register: Documents, Essays, and Facts, Together with Notices of the Arts and Manufactures and a Record of the Times*, 60 vols. (Baltimore, MD: Franklin Press, 1812), 2:108.

<sup>86</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 12<sup>th</sup> Cong., 12<sup>th</sup> sess., 1298.

<sup>87</sup> “6257,” *Aurora General Advertiser*, 18 April 1812.

particularly emotional letter from Isaac Clarke to his wife. Clarke was a captive on HMS *Porcupine* for twenty months and had lost hope. “I am barbarously used,” he complained, “for I cannot say one crooked word without getting four or five dozen at the gang way, which makes my life a burthen to me, so that if I could once more see you, I should be willing to die, as I find I have no friend to help me out of this.” His letter ended on a bleak note, “I live in fear daily.”<sup>89</sup> Newspapers across the country reprinted many of these letters.

A final testament to the prevalence of impressment in American consciousness in the spring of 1812 can be observed in stage productions, poems and songs, and celebratory toasts. These mediums provide valuable insight into the public sphere. Theatrical offerings, hymns, and odes, were a direct response to public demand. Meanwhile, toasts were an opportunity for individuals and organizations to openly display their politics.

The selection of plays produced by theatre companies reveal what most interested the American people at a given time. Theatre companies worried about profitability more than political grandstanding and adjusted their offerings accordingly. For example, in 1798 when William Dunlap premiered his tragedy, *Andre*, about the execution of British spy, Major John Andre, during the Revolution, it did not fare well with audiences. This stemmed in large part from Dunlap’s heroic portrayal of Major Andre. While today *Andre* is recognized for its historical significance as the first American tragedy, at the

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<sup>88</sup> “More Impressments,” *Savannah Register*, 21 February 1812; “Another of the 6257 American Slaves,” *Eastern Argus*, 5 March 1812.

<sup>89</sup> “The 6257! Additional Proofs that Great Britain has done us “no essential injury,” *Essex Register*, 28 March 1812.

time theatre companies in the early republic shied away from producing it. Dunlap rewrote *Andre*, turned it into a celebration of American virtues, and renamed it *The Glory of Columbia*. The revised play premiered in 1803 and was still being produced as late as 1850.<sup>90</sup> Theatres responded to audience demand.

An examination of theatre bills during the first five months of 1812 show that what audiences wanted were patriotic, anti-British productions, often featuring American Jack Tars. In Philadelphia, the Olympic Theatre offered the following shows: *The Purse, or the Benevolent Tar*; *The Sailor's Landlady, or, Jack Tar in Distress*; *The Heart of a Sailor*; *Columbia is Free*; and *the Host That Fights For Liberty*.<sup>91</sup> The Boston Theatre also produced *The Benevolent Tar*, along with *The Press Gang, or Harlequin Aeronaut*; *The Glory of Columbia*; *American Tars*; and *Liberty or Death*.<sup>92</sup> Charleston, South Carolina, was the most important theatre hub in the South, and the Charleston Theatre produced much of the same material as the Olympic and Boston Theatres, including *American Tars* and *The Host That Fights For Liberty*. In addition, the Charleston Theatre performed *Hearts of Oak*, *The Battle of Eutaw Springs*, and *The Standard of Liberty*.<sup>93</sup> These were the productions Americans attended in 1812 – plays about the superiority of American liberty over British tyranny, and the brave, honest seamen who had lost their freedom.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Daniel S. Burt, ed., *The Chronology of American Literature: America's Literary Achievements from the Colonial Era to Modern Times* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2004), 107, 112.

<sup>91</sup> *Aurora General Advertiser*, 8 January – 5 May 1812.

<sup>92</sup> *Independent Chronicle*, 10 February – 12 April 1812.

<sup>93</sup> *Charlestown Courier*, 31 January – 16 April 1812.

Patriotic songs and poems were as popular during this time as patriotic plays. Many of these pieces first appeared in newspapers, but theatres often performed them during intermission. The songs' themes were generally similar – the duty young men had to protect American liberty from British oppression. Impressed seamen were the clearest example of the threat England posed to American freedom and figured prominently in the songs. *The American Patriot's War Song: Or an Appeal to Freeman* is a prime sample. The song opened with the plight of captive sailors.

Times, alas! are most distressing,  
They who feel may well complain,  
Britain still our sons impressing,  
Tyranizes o'er the main.  
Thousands, doom'd to base employments,  
Spend in chains their hopeless lives:  
Torn from all their dear enjoyments,  
Parents, children, friends, and wives.  
Hear the father thus bemoaning:  
"O my sons, for you I die!"  
While his captive children groaning,  
In a floating dungeon lie.  
See the line of battle closing!  
See the gallant foe advance!  
See, our hardy sons opposing,  
Forc'd to fight the tars of France!  
Can you bear such treatment *freemen*!  
Will you drain the cup of *woe*?  
Rouse, to save impressed seamen!  
Rouse, to conquer every foe!<sup>95</sup>

After the above stanza, the song moves on to other complaints of the United States, particularly the belief that Great Britain was inciting Indian attacks on frontier settlements and using secret agents to promote disunion in New England. *Lines*

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<sup>95</sup> *An American Patriot's War Song, Or an Appeal to Freeman*; Broadside Ballads and Songs, Isaiah Thomas Collection; American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

*Addressed to the Patriotic American Volunteers* first appeared in the *Eastern Argus* (Portland, Maine) three weeks before the declaration of war. It followed a structure similar to the *American Patriot's War Song*, calling Americans to action, and outlining the wrongs suffered by the United States, including impressment.<sup>96</sup> Both songs appeared in print before Madison's war message and emphasized impressment.

At least three new songs in the spring of 1812 concerned only the condition of Columbia's tars. *American Seamen's Lamentation* was a poem written from the perspective of captive seamen.

From dungeons of Britain, which float on the main,  
O hear the sad tale of our sorrowful moan:  
The sun of your freedom for us shines in vain,  
As captives we live but to sigh and to groan.  
Oh brothers! Ye boast of your liberty won,  
By Washington's feats and by deeds of your own;  
No ray meets our eyes of bright liberty's sun,  
Forc'd to fight and to die for a land not our own.

The song demonstrated the loyalty of America's seamen as the guardians of liberty and defenders of their fellow citizens. Although the seamen were captive aboard British men of war, they desired their own liberty chiefly to protect the freedoms of their loved ones.

How happy with you to conquer or die,  
For country and liberty offer our lives,  
At the word of command be still ready to fly,  
Protecting our parents, our children and wives.

*American Seamen's Lamentation* concluded with a plea that the nation not forget the captive sailors.

Forget not your sailors, in thralldom severe,  
Who think not to cease and to pine after you;

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<sup>96</sup> "Lines Addressed to the Patriotic American Volunteers," *Eastern Argus*, 28 May 1812.

Be not plunder'd of all which a man holds most dear,  
Nor suffer our days to be numbered but few.  
Then pity, dear nation, our sorrowful strain,  
Nor let us forever solicit in vain.<sup>97</sup>

Another work was simply titled *An Original Song*. Sung to the tune of *Yankee Doodle Dandy*, *An Original Song* was written in the spirit of Congressman Robert Wright's bill encouraging American seamen to physically resist impressment. The song echoed the call of "The Ghost of Montgomery" by urging captive seamen to mutiny. It urged free American sailors to volunteer for service in the fast approaching war and help free his fellow tars, as well.

Oh Mars! Inspire each Yankee tar,  
That's held a British slave,  
To break the tyrant's yoke of war  
And show Freedom's sons are brave.  
Yankee land is Liberty's hall,  
Yankee Doodle dandy,  
Let British boatswains wind the call  
And, freedom is the dandy.  
Yankees too have learnt from Mars  
To fight on Neptune's wave,  
And Fortune smiles when forced to wars,  
On Freedom's sons that's brave.  
Yankee land, etc.  
No Yankee tar the ocean sails,  
Is formed for Britain's slave;  
All hearts of oak Columbia hails,  
And gives freedom to the brave.  
Yankee land, etc.  
Let Parker's spirit once arise,<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> "American Seamen's Lamentation," *Charleston City Gazette*, 3 June 1812.

<sup>98</sup> "Parker's spirit" was likely a reference to Richard Parker, the leader of the massive 1798 Royal Navy mutiny at the Nore.

To each tar that's kept a slave,  
Liberty's theirs – then share the prize,  
'Mong jolly tars that's brave.  
Yankee land, etc.  
Arouse, then, jovial sailors all,  
Your fellow seamen save;  
Let every boatswain wind his call,  
And pipe freedom to the brave.<sup>99</sup>

*The Kidnapped Seamen* followed similar themes, going into greater detail about the conditions Americans were forced to labor under, and appealing to the nation's martial spirit to free their fellow citizens. Homespun songs and pulp poetry allow for a richer understanding of the public's perception of national politics. War with Great Britain seemed a foregone conclusion based on the songs reviewed above. The importance attached to impressment as a cause of conflict is equally transparent when examining the lyrics.

Celebratory toasts were another common expression of politics in the public sphere. Militia units, fraternal societies and political groups often closed their gatherings by offering a variety of toasts. It was common for the toasts to be printed in local newspapers, so they were generally carefully crafted statements of either political support or derision.

When the officers of the 25<sup>th</sup> Pennsylvania Militia Regiment gathered for a dinner in March, 1812, they concluded their evening with twelve toasts. The seventh time they raised their glasses they saluted the United States Navy, but with this pointed sentiment: “When wanted let it [the Navy] be increased, and when increased, let the first use of it be to rescue our fellow (6257) citizens, the American impressed seamen, from worse than

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<sup>99</sup> “A New Song,” *Aurora General Advertiser*, 21 June 1812.

Tripolitan slavery.”<sup>100</sup> The Pennsylvania militia was not the only group lifting libations to the future freedom of captive sailors. The leading citizens of Norfolk held a feast in honor of Virginia’s governor, James Barbour. Among the toasts offered that night was one lamenting the continued presence of American citizens aboard Britain’s “floating dungeons” and the necessity of avenging them.<sup>101</sup> The Columbian Union Society of Philadelphia tied off its celebration of the twelfth anniversary of Thomas Jefferson’s presidential election with fifteen toasts. The fourteenth toast was offered to impressed American seamen: “Whether in British floating Hells, or French dungeons – May right measures be adopted to assure their speedy return to their native land, to enjoy the liberty for which their ancestors bled.” That toast received nine cheers – only the final toast offered to “the fair sex” elicited louder cheers.<sup>102</sup> Lastly, the Marine Society of Charleston, South Carolina, commemorated its anniversary with seventeen toasts, each accompanied by a nautical song. The Marine Society strongly condemned Massachusetts Senator Timothy Pickering, a Federalist who had repeatedly dismissed the severity of impressment. The members drank to the Tree of Liberty, “that we may never block our hearts against a seaman in distress,” the Freedom of the Seas, and to “The Adopted Citizens of Our Country – may they ever receive that protection we have in our power to give.”<sup>103</sup> The last was particularly meaningful since Federalists repeatedly argued that the majority of impressed seamen were not native citizens, but naturalized Americans, and therefore not entitled to the same government protection.

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<sup>100</sup> *Aurora General Advertiser*, 9 March 1812.

<sup>101</sup> “Tribute of Respect,” *Alexandria Herald*, 11 May 1812.

<sup>102</sup> “Activity,” *Aurora General Advertiser*, 17 March 1812.

<sup>103</sup> “Marine Society,” *Charleston City Gazette*, 25 February 1812.

The frustration over impressment evident in so many sectors of American politics and society spilled over into American diplomacy. Augustus Foster refused to negotiate with Monroe on any issue of substance. In April, Monroe responded to diplomatic failure by writing a series of anonymous editorials for the *National Intelligencer*. Although the article's authorship was unknown at the time, the nature of the writing made it clear that they were penned by someone in the government. The editorials' publication in the *National Intelligencer* made the pieces semi-official administration views. In the first article, the Secretary of State criticized Great Britain for "violence and injustice" directed against the United States. He singled out impressment; "She has impressed our seamen from on board our own vessels, and held them in long and oppressive bondage."<sup>104</sup> Monroe continued by strongly advocating war.

The final step ought to be taken; and that step is WAR. By what course of measures we have reached the present crisis is not a question for freemen and patriots to discuss. It exists; and it is by open and manly war only that we can get through it with honor and advantage to the country. Our wrongs have been great; our cause is just . . . Let war therefore be forthwith proclaimed against England. With her there can be no motive for delay. Any further discussion, any new attempt at negotiation would be as fruitless as it would be dishonorable.<sup>105</sup>

The last chance President Madison saw of avoiding a declaration of war against Great Britain were the messages arriving aboard the USS *Hornet*. The American sloop carried the latest news and correspondence from England. The ship might have brought instructions for Foster ordering him to make meaningful concessions. The *Hornet* could have word of a repeal of the Orders in Council. Such a gesture by Great Britain to the United States may have allowed Madison to forego hostilities in favor of continued negotiations.

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<sup>104</sup> "Washington City," *National Intelligencer*, 9 April 1812.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 14 April 1812.

When the *Hornet* arrived on May 22, 1812, however, there was no positive news to report. The Percival ministry's intransigence continued and Foster's instructions were unchanged. Madison, many of his fellow Republicans, and a large portion of the American people believed that Great Britain had left the United States with only two options – war or subjugation, which was really no option at all.

Madison presented his war message to Congress on June 1, 1812. The essential point of Madison's speech was that Great Britain's aggressive actions had already created a state of war. The United States abstained from retaliation in hopes of reconciliation, but American forbearance was at an end. The President illustrated England's belligerence by extrapolating on the wrongs committed by that nation. Madison began with impressment.

Thousands of American Citizens . . . 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.

Against this crying enormity . . . the United States have, in vain, exhausted remonstrances and expostulations.<sup>106</sup>

Impressment no longer acted as an obstacle to peace, instead impressment served as a catalyst for war. The war message continued with a lengthy overview of the Orders in Council, a brief recap of the Henry affair,<sup>107</sup> and the belief that Great Britain was

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<sup>106</sup> "An Address to Congress," 1 June 1812, *PJM: Pres. Series*, 4: 432-33.

<sup>107</sup> John Henry was a former US Army captain turned printer who acted as a British spy for three months in 1809. He was under the patronage of Sir James Craig, Governor-General of Canada. Craig charged Henry with gauging the extent of Federalist discontent in Massachusetts, hoping to persuade Massachusetts Federalists to form an independent New England confederacy in case of a war between the United States and Great Britain. Henry eventually felt slighted by the British government and sold all his documents to the Madison administration. Madison hoped to crush Massachusetts Federalists and embarrass the British with the Henry papers, but there was little in the documents tying Federalist leaders directly to the fomentation of rebellion in New England. The Henry papers were successful, however, in demonstrating that the British government was meddling in America's domestic affairs. Hickey, *The War of 1812*, 34-6.

instrumental in causing frontier tensions with the Indians. Madison left no record explaining why he wrote his war message in the manner he did; maybe it was chronological, or perhaps it was by priority, or maybe it was arbitrary. The war message was as much for public consumption as it was to get Congress to declare war, though. Madison had to sell the American people on armed conflict with Great Britain. Certainly, impressment was the issue on which Madison had the strongest footing. Impressment was not an issue that the President had to spend time explaining. The people knew impressment. They understood impressment. They despised impressment. The complicated nuances of the Orders in Council were murkier, so Madison used his message to edify the public. There was also little doubt about the validity of Madison's claims against British press gangs. Everybody knew that the abduction of American seamen was a twenty year old tragedy. The exact nature of the British government's involvement in the Henry affair and inciting Native Americans was far more speculative, though.

It must be remembered that Madison was engrossed in the impressment controversy almost from its genesis, as well. As a leader in the House of Representatives, Madison had advocated on behalf of seamen's rights since the Jay Treaty debates and had fully endorsed the Seamen's Act. Madison tangled with British diplomats for eight years to end impressment during his tenure as Secretary of State. He had also been the final arbiter in determining which sailor's appeals for release were pursued and which were deemed insufficient. In that capacity, Madison read hundreds of letters and petitions detailing the hardships faced by impressed seamen. Finally, as President, James Madison spent most of his first term trying to finesse a concession out of Great Britain that could

ease tensions between the two nations, and hopefully result in some sort of agreement on impressment. While Madison never approached impressment with the same fiery rhetoric as Edward Livingston or proposed radical legislation like Robert Wright, his commitment to ending impressment was unwavering. Madison's war message can certainly be read as the culmination of nearly two decades of frustration.

Two days after President Madison delivered his war message, the House Foreign Relations Committee responded with a recommendation of war. John C. Calhoun presented his committee's report. Although a great part of it dwelt on the Order in Council, Calhoun made it clear that trade disagreements were not the most important difference between the United States and Great Britain. He termed impressment a wrong "more severely felt."

Under the pretext of impressing British seamen, our fellow-citizens are seized in British parts, on the high seas, and in every other quarter to which the British power extends; are taken aboard British men of war, and compelled to serve there as British subjects. In this mode our citizens are wantonly snatched from their country and their families, deprived of their liberty, and doomed to an ignominious and slavish bondage; compelled to fight the battle of a foreign country, and often to perish in them. Our flag has given them no protection; it has been unceasingly violated, and our vessels exposed to dangers by the loss of the men taken from them. Your committee need not remark that, while this practice is continued, it is impossible for the United States to consider themselves an independent nation. Every new case is a new proof of their degradation.<sup>108</sup>

Impressment threatened the future of the United States as a free and independent nation, according to the Foreign Relations committee. Calhoun made no similar claim concerning the Orders in Council.

The House of Representatives voted for war by 79-49 decision on June 4, 1812. The Senate took longer, but on June 17, 1812, that body also elected for war against

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<sup>108</sup> *Annals of Congress*, 12<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1550-51.

Great Britain, 19-12.<sup>109</sup> It was largely a party vote. Not a single Federalist voted for the war. They were joined in their opposition by sixteen Republicans in the House, and six in the Senate. The majority of Republicans who voted against the war did so because of factionalism within their party, with southern Quids joining New York Clintonians in defiance of Madison. It is important to note, however, that every region of the United States supported the war. New England cast a total of fourteen votes in favor of war, the western states (Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee) cast twelve, the mid-Atlantic region twenty-five, and the southern states forty-seven. Pennsylvania contributed the most supporting votes with eighteen, followed by Virginia (16), South Carolina (10), Maryland (9), North Carolina (7), Kentucky (7), and Massachusetts (6).

Earlier this dissertation established that impressment was not a concern confined to the New England states. The abduction of American seamen affected the mid-Atlantic most severely, and took a considerably larger toll on the South than previously thought. Historians turned away from the maritime causality thesis, in large part because they could not reconcile southern and western support for a war over impressed seamen and seized vessels. A more complete understanding of the demographics of impressment and the impact of the practice on American society helps make sense of why Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina rallied behind a conflict aimed at stopping maritime depredations.

The War of 1812 was not monocausal. Every congressman who voted for war had his own motivation for so doing. Robert Wright most likely had American seamen in mind when he voted aye, but Jeremiah Morrow of Ohio may have been more concerned

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<sup>109</sup> For a record of how each congressman voted, see; *Annals of Congress*, 12<sup>th</sup> Cong. 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 297 (Senate), 1637 (House).

about frontier security, and maybe Virginia's William Burwell was motivated by party loyalty. The evidence presented in this chapter has not been an attempt to argue that impressment was the *most* important cause. Instead, the effort has been to demonstrate unequivocally that impressment played a fundamental role in the decision for war – for President Madison, Congress, state legislatures, and, perhaps most importantly, the American people. Impressment was also instrumental in the decision for peace. Days after the declaration, August Foster asked Madison if a repeal of the Orders in Council would allow for a return to peace. Madison responded that only a revocation *plus* a promise of negotiation on the question of impressment could suffice.<sup>110</sup> Madison maintained that stance for two more years before relenting on a resolution concerning impressment as a precondition for peace.

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<sup>110</sup> “Memorandum of a Conversation with Augustus J. Foster,” 23 June 1812, *PJM: Pres. Series*, 4:502.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION “WE’VE GAINED THE FREEDOM OF THE SEAS”

The War of 1812 raged between the United States and Great Britain for more than two years. The Treaty of Ghent ended the conflict. American and British peace commissioners agreed to terms on December 24, 1814. The United States Senate ratified the treaty two months later, bringing hostilities to a formal close, although some fighting continued into April 1815 due to the slow dissemination of information. The Treaty of Ghent reestablished Anglo-American affairs on a *status quo ante bellum* basis. The peace agreement contained no article on impressment. The Madison administration led the United States into war, in large part, because of seaman abductions. Madison rejected early overtures of peace because Britain refused to relinquish the right to impress American sailors. Secretary of State James Monroe’s initial instructions to the American peace commissioners at Ghent made the prohibition of impressment a *sine qua non* to a treaty. Surprisingly, the Madison administration dropped impressment as a precondition for peace by the summer of 1814. Shifting national interests had relegated the coerced labor of seamen to a secondary priority.

The war had not proceeded in the manner Madison hoped. Possession of Canada had figured prominently in the president’s, but all American attempts to conquer that vast land had failed. The United States Army continued to slug it out with the British Army along the Niagara frontier. The British had captured large parts of Maine and moved through the Chesapeake Bay area with impunity. Government buildings in Washington, D.C., lay in ashes. The Royal Navy’s blockade of the Atlantic coast had grown steadily stronger throughout the war, trapping American warships and privateers in port, choking off American trade, and sinking the American economy. The federal government lacked

the money to continue the war for another year. New England Federalists were threatening secession.

True, the United States had won important victories. The battles of Lake Erie and the Thames had secured the Old Northwest and broken Tecumseh's native federation. American victories at Baltimore and Plattsburgh had turned back two separate British invasions. After two years of fighting, however, the United States had gained nothing. The Madison administration's priorities shifted and ending the war on the best possible terms became the principle concern. Impressment would not prevent peace.<sup>1</sup>

Almost as soon as the War of 1812 began, both American and British officials made an effort to end the hostilities before they began in earnest. At the end of June 1812, Secretary of State James Monroe sent instructions to Jonathan Russell, the American *chargés d'affaires* in London. Monroe ordered Russell to agree to an armistice with the British in exchange for a repeal of the Orders in Council and an end to impressment. Of course, the British had already repealed the Orders in Council, but they were not interested in halting impressment.<sup>2</sup> United States Major General Henry

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent general history of military operations of the War of 1812, as well as a succinct overview of the peace negotiations at Ghent, see Don Hickey, *The War of 1812: The Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 72-299; for more on the negotiations at Ghent, see Paul Gilje, *Free Trade and Sailors' Rights in the War of 1812* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 244-61; for more on the combat along the Niagara Peninsula, see Richard Barbuto, *Niagara 1814: American Invades Canada* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2000); for more on British operations in the Chesapeake, including the slave liberating activities of the British Army, see Alan Taylor, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772-1832* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2013); for more on Madison's Canadian aims and plans, see J.C.A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783-1830* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 3-47.

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Russell to James Monroe, 1 September 1812, *American State Papers: Foreign Relations* 3: 588-590.

Dearborn and British Lieutenant General Sir George Prevost had negotiated a peace, but Madison rejected the pact because it did not include a provision on impressment.<sup>3</sup>

In 1813, Tsar Alexander I of Russia offered to mediate a peace between Great Britain and the United States. Madison agreed to the Russian offer. Stalwart Republican Albert Gallatin, experienced foreign diplomat John Quincy Adams, and Federalist James Bayard comprised the initial American peace commission sent to St. Petersburg.<sup>4</sup> The commissioners' instructions from James Monroe made clear the priorities of the Madison administration. "The impressment of our seamen and . . . the orders in council, were the principal causes in war. Had not Great Britain persevered obstinately in the violation of these important rights, the war would not have been declared. It will cease as soon as these rights are respected."<sup>5</sup> Monroe further emphasized the importance of ending seamen abductions in his private communications with Gallatin. "The practice [of impressment] being essentially a cause of the war, and the primary object of your negotiation," Monroe explained, "a treaty of peace, leaving it in silence and trusting to a mere understanding liable to doubts and different explanations, would not be that security which the United States has a right to expect."<sup>6</sup> Peace in 1813 continued to hinge on impressment.

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<sup>3</sup> Monroe to Russell, 21 August 1812, *ASP: FR* 3: 587-88.

<sup>4</sup> Andre de Daschkoff to James Monroe, 8 March 1813; Monroe to de Daschkoff, 11 March 1813; *ASP: FR* 3: 624.

<sup>5</sup> James Monroe to the Plenipotentiaries of the United States for treating of peace with Great Britain, 15 April 1813, *ASP: FR* 3: 695.

<sup>6</sup> James Monroe to Albert Gallatin, 5 May 1813, *The Papers of Albert Gallatin*, vol. 2, ed. Henry Adams (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott, 1879), 541.

The British declined Tsar Alexander's mediation, though. British foreign secretary Lord Castlereagh instead proposed direct talks between the two belligerent nations. Madison agreed.<sup>7</sup> Madison nominated two more men to join the American delegation, American *chargés d'affaires* in London Jonathan Russell and Republican War Hawk Henry Clay. Monroe sent the American peace commissioners more explicit instructions on how to handle the issue of impressment.

The Madison administration would exclude all British seamen from United States sea service – both public and merchant. This would allay British fears of their seamen escaping naval duty by signing aboard American bottoms. Congress passed a law requiring five years of continual residency in the United States for an individual to achieve naturalization. Any foreign-born seaman trying to gain employment aboard an American vessel had to present his naturalization papers to both the ship captain and the customs officer. The penalty for employing a British seaman was a fine of either \$500 or \$1,000. Half the penalty fee would go to the individual who alerted authorities. Finally, the forging of either naturalization papers or seaman protections was punishable by a five-year prison sentence. These regulations would effectively prohibit British sailors from United States service. The Royal Navy could have no pretext for searching American ships.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Lord Castlereagh to James Monroe, 4 November 1813; Monroe to Castlereagh, 5 January 1814, *ASP: FR* 3: 621, 622-23.

<sup>8</sup> James Monroe to the Russian Peace Conference Delegates, Instructions, 15 April 1813, *ASP: FR* 3: 696-96; *An Act of the regulation of seamen on board public and private vessels of the United States*, 3 March 1813, *Statutes at Large of the United States* 2 (1845), 809-11.

The Madison administration expected a ban on impressment in exchange for the new law. “The precise form in which it might be done is not insisted on, provided the import is explicit. All that is required is, that . . . the British Government shall stipulate, in some adequate manner, to terminate or forebear the practice of impressment from American vessels.” Monroe instructed the negotiators were instructed to secure the release of all impressed American seamen. The British were also to discharge any United States citizens who had been naturalized as a result of their compulsory service in the Royal Navy.<sup>9</sup> Finally, Monroe urged Gallatin and his fellow negotiators to secure financial compensation for the victims of impressment. “It is proper, and would have a conciliatory effect, that all our impressed seamen, who may be discharged under it should be paid for their services by the British Government, for the time of their detention, the wages they might have obtained in the merchant service of their country.”<sup>10</sup> Madison and Monroe’s initial agenda for impressment in the peace talks was ambitious.

By the summer of 1814, negotiations at Ghent had not even begun when an abrupt about face occurred in the American stance over impressment. “On mature consideration,” Monroe wrote to the peace delegates, “it has been decided, that, under all the circumstances . . . incident to the prosecution of war, you may omit any stipulation on the subject of impressment, if found indispensably necessary to terminate it.” The Secretary of State cautioned the commissioners to revert to such an expedient only if

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<sup>9</sup> James Monroe to Russian Peace Conference Delegates, Instructions, 15 April 1813, *ASP: FR 3*: 696.

<sup>10</sup> James Monroe to the Plenipotentiaries of the United States for treating of peace with Great Britain, 28 January 1814, *ASP: FR 3*: 702.

impressment proved an immovable obstacle to ending the war. Nevertheless, a ban on seamen abductions was no longer a *sine qua non* for the United States.<sup>11</sup>

Although the United States' greatest defeats of the war – the embarrassment at Bladensburg and the burning of Washington – had not yet occurred when Madison retracted a cessation of impressment as a condition for peace, significant American victories at Baltimore, Plattsburgh, and New Orleans also lay in the future.<sup>12</sup> The United States was not negotiating from a position of strength in the summer of 1814. The defeat of Napoleon that spring weakened America's stance in the talks. Great Britain did not have to worry about hastily concluding the war with America to muster sufficient resources against France. Madison and Monroe were cognizant of this, and adjusted their expectations. The Republican leaders tried to maintain appearances and they dropped impressment as a *sine qua non* because the end of the European war meant an inevitable draw down in the Royal Navy and a natural halt to seaman abductions. An anticipated shrinking of the British navy may have played a factor, but had the United States held Canada as a bargaining chip in, impressment would have remained indelibly inscribed on the American agenda at Ghent.<sup>13</sup> The weak American position in the peace talks did not lay in Napoleon's defeat alone. The United States had failed to secure any meaningful gains in the war.

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<sup>11</sup> James Monroe to the Plenipotentiaries of the United States, 27 June 1814, *ibid.*, 704.

<sup>12</sup> The American defeat at Bladensburg and the burning of Washington occurred 24 August 1814, nearly two months after Monroe sent his instructions. The United States victories at Baltimore, Plattsburgh and New Orleans did not take place until 12-15 September, 1814, 11 September 1814 and 8 January 1815, respectively.

<sup>13</sup> For more on how Napoleon's defeat effected the mentality of the American peace commissioners, see Albert Gallatin and James Bayard to James Monore, 6 May 1814, *Gallatin Papers*, 1: 611.

Negotiations finally commenced between the American and British delegations at Ghent in August 1814. The two sides were so far apart that peace seemed impossible. English demands included the United States cede control of the Great Lakes to Britain, along with a large section of northern Maine. The British also wanted to turn a significant amount of land in the old Northwest into a Native American reservation.<sup>14</sup> The United States was not willing to concede these points. The British, for their part, were unwilling to discuss any of the American claims. At the end of October, after nearly three months of fruitless talks, Gallatin, Adams, and the rest were pessimistic about their chances of success. “We are still expecting every day, and indeed every hour, the formal notice of our termination of business here,” John Quincy Adams wrote to his mother Abigail. The British commissioners “have entirely changed the object of the war, and begun by requiring of us . . . concessions which with one voice and without hesitation we refused.”<sup>15</sup>

The American delegates remained in Ghent despite the strained tone of the peace talks. Gallatin explained their reasoning in a private letter to James Monroe: “Our negotiations here have been protracted longer than I had expected . . . The only advantage arising from it is that a change in Europe or a reverse of the British in America might alter their views and produce a peace.” The benefit to remaining in Ghent was clear. “Whilst we remain here it may happen at any time, if any such contingency should

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<sup>14</sup> Commissioners Extrordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United States for Treating of Peace with Great Britain to Secretary of State, 12 August 1814, *ASP: FR 3: 705-07*.

<sup>15</sup> John Quincy Adams to Abigail Adams, 10 September 1814, *The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, vol. 8, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1915), 130-31.

happen, and that, considering distance and irritation, a renewal of negotiations once broken would be attended with much delay and difficulty.”<sup>16</sup>

As the talks at Ghent dragged on, Gallatin wrote Monroe that the best case scenario for the United States was to achieve status quo antebellum. Impressment had no place in such an agreement.<sup>17</sup> Bayard and Clay, at least, were eager to discard the topic. Bayard had been pleading with Monroe to leave impressment out of any peace negotiations since May 1813. “Whether the chief point of difficulty be placed upon practical ground, you will permit me to doubt,” the Delaware Senator wrote the Secretary of State. “I never doubted as to the point of right, but a nation without yielding may occasionally find an interest in temporizing with regards to its rights.”<sup>18</sup> Henry Clay, meanwhile, admitted a few weeks before peace talks opened, “If the negotiation is brought to the single issue . . . of impressment, I confess I should pause before I consented to a total rupture of negotiation.” He did not believe that seaman abductions should stand between the United States and peace: “If I were persuaded that the interests of the Country demanded of me the personal risk of a violation of instructions I should not hesitate to incur it.”<sup>19</sup> Albert Gallatin never believed impressment provided the United States the strongest negotiating position. His skepticism dated back to the Jefferson administration. The American delegation dropped the issue after making a final attempt at an impressment provision in November.

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<sup>16</sup> Albert Gallatin to James Monroe, 26 October 1814, *Writings of Albert Gallatin*, 1: 640.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> James Bayard to James Monroe, 5 May 1813, *The Papers of James Bayard*, vol. 2, ed. Elizabeth Dunnan (Washington: American Historical Association, 1915), 221.

<sup>19</sup> Henry Clay to William Crawford, 2 July 1814, *The Papers of Henry Clay*, vol. 1, ed. James F. Hopkins (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1959), 937.

The British negotiators gradually backed away from their demands. The stunning American victory at Plattsburgh, combined with the United States' stout defense of Baltimore, certainly strengthened the American position at Ghent. The fact that the British people were war weary after two decades of constant combat, also aided the United States. The final version of the Treaty of Ghent established Anglo-American relations as status quo antebellum with no mention of impressment. Gallatin's prediction had proved prescient.

The American people were glad to see the end of the war. The timing of the treaty meshed almost perfectly with the resounding victory of the American forces at New Orleans. Andrew Jackson's triumph, combined with the successful autumn victories on Lake Champlain and at Fort McHenry, allowed for the construction of a narrative that portrayed the United States as the victor. There was no protest over the exclusion of impressment from the treaty. The conclusion of the Anglo-French wars had all but ended the practice. Since impressment was not the albatross to the country that it had been prior to 1812, it was easy for the American public to overlook its absence from the peace agreement. The omission of an impressment provision from the Treaty of Ghent and the acquiescence of the American people to such an accord, should not diminish the importance of seamen abductions in the early republic. Indeed, impressment continued to resonate in the United States for decades after the War of 1812.

In the four decades following the Treaty of Ghent, impressment was a regular feature in songs and poems commemorating the conflict. Histories of the second Anglo-American war routinely singled out the incarceration of American seamen aboard Royal Navy ships as a primary cause of hostilities. Impressment narratives proved popular

among the American people. These popular culture representations of impressment helped strengthen the narrative of American righteousness in the war.

The writings of impressed seamen have been prominently featured in this dissertation, so there is no need to go through the works in detail. The significance of the impressment narratives, however, deserves more attention. In all, more than half a dozen impressment narrative were published.<sup>20</sup> The tales followed similar trajectories as each man wove a narrative of capture, resistance, physical abuse, adventure, and daring escape. These writings expressed a good amount of anger towards the British, as well, to go along with declarations of fierce patriotism. It is hardly surprising that every one of these men (except James Durand who was still held by the Royal Navy) went on to fight against the British in the War of 1812.

Impressment narratives enjoyed undeniable popularity. It almost became necessary for any seaman's autobiography to include a section on impressment.

Benjamin Waterhouse worked impressment into his memoir on his time as a British prisoner of war. Moses Smith published his memoirs in 1846. Although he was never

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<sup>20</sup> Impressment narratives included Joshua Davis, *A Narrative of Joshua Davis, an American Citizen, Who Was Pressed and Served Aboard Six Ships of the British Navy* (Baltimore: B. Edes, 1811); James M'Lean, *Seventeen Years' History, of the Life and Sufferings of James M'Lean an Impressed American Citizen & Seaman . . .* (Hartford, CT: B & J Russell, 1814); Joshua Penny, *The Life and Adventures of Joshua Penny . . .* (New York: Published by the Author, 1815); James R. Durand, *The Life and Adventures of James R. Durand . . .* (Bridgeport, CT: Stiles, Nichols, and Son, 1817); David C. Bunnell, *The Travels and Adventures of David C. Bunnell During Twenty-Three Years of a Sea-Faring Life. . .* (Palmyra, NY: J.H. Bortles, 1831); James Cooper Fennimore, ed., *Ned Myers: A Life Before the Mast* (London: Collins, 1843); Nicholas P. Isaacs, *Twenty Years Before the Mast, or Life in the Forecastle Being the Experiences and Voyages of Nicholas Peters Isaacs* (New York: J.P. Beckwith, 1845); Samuel Holbrook, *Threescore Years: An Autobiography, Containing Incidents of Voyages and Travels, Including Six Years in a Man-of-War* (Boston: James French and Company, 1857).

forced into British service, Smith made sure to include impressment in his story. Smith wanted his readers to know how seamen felt about the War of 1812.

At length the news arrived of the declaration of war. That was indeed an exciting day. All truly American hearts began to beat with desires for their country's honor, and our naval tars looked for that honor in heroic fight. . . . Our vessels were mostly manned with native-born Americans, who felt a real interest in their country's welfare and fought not merely from compulsion or gain, as is often the case with the hired minions of arbitrary powers. When they struck, therefore, they struck as freemen fighting for their rights, and every blow told hard upon the quailing enemy.<sup>21</sup>

It was as though including impressment in an antebellum sea narrative added legitimacy to the work. Historian Myra Glenn has studied some of the impressment accounts in her work on sea-life narratives in antebellum America. Glenn argues that the autobiographies can be read as stirring coming of age stories that celebrated the United States uniqueness in the world. Sailors' accounts also touted Jack Tar's early embrace of American nationalism and asserted the authors' masculinity.<sup>22</sup> Patriotism and manliness were necessary because they helped throw off the shroud of victimhood that may have otherwise plagued the men. The writers made impressment exciting for the reader because they refused to allow their circumstances to frighten or feminize them. Impressment narratives also marked advent of the sea story as a genre of literature in the United States. Hester Blum, a scholar of American literature, argues that early sea narratives – particularly tales of impressment and Barbary captivity – created an ever

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<sup>21</sup> Moses Smith, *Naval Scenes in the Last War or Three Years Aboard the Frigate Constitution and the Admas, Including the Capture of the Guerriere, Being the True Narrative of Moses Smith, a Survivor of the "Old Ironsides" Crew* (Boston: Gleason's Publishing Hall, 1846), 23-4.

<sup>22</sup> Myra Glenn, *Jack Tar's Story: The Autobiographies of Memoirs of Sailors in Antebellum American* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3-5, 58-9.

expanding market for stories of life at sea. Into that market stepped James Fennimore Cooper.<sup>23</sup>

Cooper was the first great American novelist. Today he is best remembered for his Leatherstocking novels particularly *Last of the Mohicans*. Among his early publications were several sea-tales, including *The Pilot*, *The Red Rover*, and *The Sea-Witch*. Literary scholar Thomas Philbrick argued that “the sea novel as we know it owes its inception to the meeting of maritime nationalism and romanticism in the imagination of James Fennimore Cooper.”<sup>24</sup> The tribulations and adventures of Penny and Davis and M’Lean and Durand prepared the market for Cooper’s fictionalized tales of sea adventure. Cooper must have appreciated the impressment narrative, himself. When he edited and published friend Ned Myers’ tale of a life at sea, Cooper made sure that Myers’ brushes with the press gang were a prominent feature.<sup>25</sup>

Seaman abductions were often written into in songs and poems that commemorated the conflict with Britain. During much of postwar period, impressed seamen occupied an important position in national memorials. Eventually, Andrew Jackson and the raucous song, “The Hunters of Kentucky,” came to dominate the iconography of the War of 1812. The first symbol of the war, though, was the hardy and loyal American tar. Among the first lyrics to celebrate the place of captive Yankee sailors in the war were “Ye Parliament in England,” “Old England, Forty Years Ago,” and “America.”

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<sup>23</sup> Hester Blum, *The View From the Masthead: Maritime Imagination and Antebellum American Sea Narratives* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 68-75.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Philbrick, *James Fennimore Cooper and the Development of American Sea Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 43.

<sup>25</sup> James Fennimore Cooper, ed., *Ned Myers: A Life Before the Mast* (London: Collins, 1843).

“Ye Parliament in England” was written sometime in 1814. The song began with a warning to Parliament that England got more than she anticipated in the war with the United States. The second verse catalogued the wrongs Great Britain perpetrated against America:

You first confined our commerce,  
And said our ships shan't trade,  
You next impressed our seamen,  
And used them as your slaves,  
You then insulted Rodgers,  
While plying o'er the main,  
And had we not declared war,  
You'd have done it all again.

Impressment featured more prominently in the verse than at first glance. The “insult” to Commodore John Rodgers referenced to the *President-Little Belt* incident. The reason for that confrontation was Royal Navy impressment in American waters. After the second verse, the song listed all the ways in which the United States had humiliated Great Britain over the course of the conflict. These included the victories of the USS *Constitution* and Oliver Hazard Perry's triumph on Lake Erie. (The composer clearly wrote the song before the victories at Plattsburgh and Baltimore, or he would have included them in the catalog of American triumphs.)

The song closed with a series of demands that England must meet in order for the United States to agree to peace. Impressment, of course, was one of the conditions. The consequences for failing to end impressment and surrender Canada were also detailed.

Our Rodgers, in the President,  
Will burn, sink, and destroy,  
The Congress, on the Brazil coast,  
Your commerce will annoy,  
The Essex in the South Sea,

Will put out all your lights,  
The flag she wears at mast head is;  
“Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights!”<sup>26</sup>

“Old England, Forty Years Ago” came out in 1815 after the successful ratification of the Treaty of Ghent. Fighting had ceased and Americans were jubilant. Songs like “Old England” reinforced the perception that the United States had won the War of 1812. The tune began with two stanzas about American victory in the Revolution and the unwillingness of King George, Parliament and the Royal Navy to accept the independence of the United States. The song emphasized that the worst transgression Great Britain had committed against America was the abduction of sailors:

And since that time they have been still  
Our liberties invading:  
We bore it and forbore it until  
Forebearance was degrading:  
Regardless of the sailor’s right,  
Impress’d our native seamen,  
Made them against their country fight,  
And thus enslaved our freemen.  
Great Madison besought the foe’  
He mildly did implore them  
To let the suffering captives go,  
But they would not restore them.

“Old England,” as with “Ye Parliament,” cataloged every victory of the United States, with special attention accorded to the Battle of New Orleans. The song also enumerated everything the United States achieved in the war with England.

What has our infant country gained,  
By fighting that old nation?

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<sup>26</sup> “Ye Parliament in England,” *The American National Songbook: Songs, Odes, and Other Poems on National Subjects*, ed. William McCarty (Philadelphia: William McCarthy, 1842).

Our liberties we have maintained,  
And raised our reputation.  
We've gained the freedom of the seas;  
Our seamen are released:  
Our mariners trade where they please,  
Impressments, too, have ceased.<sup>27</sup>

“America” further solidified the perception of the United States as just and victorious. The ode celebrated the War of 1812 as the “birth of American glory” and declared that Baltimore and New Orleans “have raised the shout of victory.” The entire second verse of the song was about why the United States took up arms against Great Britain. The sole reason for the war, as presented in “America” was impressment.

Supreme are the joys this day will afford ye,  
For Freedom has gathered green bays for each son:  
Brothers made captive for vengeance implore thee,  
And wept with delight at the battles you won:  
A firm and united band,  
Freed by your valiant hand,  
No tyrants shall force them from Liberty's tree:  
With grateful emotion  
They offer devotion  
To the God who protects them on land and on sea.<sup>28</sup>

Both “Old England” and “America” asserted a greater number of accomplishments in the war than they could rightly claim. The songs credited the peace settlement at Ghent and the end of impressment to victories at Baltimore and New Orleans. The cessation of impressment had nothing to do with the end of the War of 1812 and everything to do with the defeat of Napoleon. There was also no doubt that

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<sup>27</sup> “Old England Forty Years Ago,” *A Collection of American Songs and Ballads*, 205 in Number (London: The British Library, 1840), 51.

<sup>28</sup> “America,” *American National Songbook*, ed. William McCarty.

Britannia continued to rule the seas. Those details did not faze self-congratulatory Americans, though. The more time that passed since the humiliation at Bladensburg and the burning of Washington and the disaster at Queenstown and every other American debacle in the war, the easier it was to cling to narratives like the ones presented in these popular elegies.

Impressment played a key role in the narrative of the war that developed during the Era of Good Feelings. The captivity of Yankee tars, more than anything else in these songs, marked the United States as the aggrieved and just party. How could the United States lose the war when the nation was fighting for something as righteous as the freedom of its own citizens? It could not, which is why these odes to victory gloss over the many reverses and divisiveness of the War of 1812.

Early histories of the conflict focused on impressment, as well. Gilbert Hunt released one of the first narratives of the war in 1816. Hunt fancied himself a modern Thucydides. He wrote in a prose-verse hybrid which he termed “the ancient historical style.” The book opened with a presentation of the war’s causality and an accusation that Great Britain had “trampled upon the altar of Liberty, and violated the sanctity thereof.” Hunt pointed to impressment as the specific abuse of England.

In as much as they robbed the ships of Columbia of the strong men that wrought therein, and used them for their own use, even as a man useth his ox or his ass. In as much as they kept the men stolen from the ships of Columbia in bondage many years, and caused them to fight the battles of the king, even against their own brethren! Neither gave they unto them silver or gold, but many stripes. Now the seamen of Columbia were not like unto the slaves of Britain; neither were their backs hardened unto the whip as were the servants of the king; therefore they murmured and their murmurings have been heard.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Gilbert J. Hunt, *The Late War Between the United States and Great Britain, From June 1812 to February 1815* (New York: David Longworth, 1816), 17-18.

Hunt singled out impressment as Great Britain's most egregious affront. He also implied that the seamen's anger about their imprisonment helped push Madison and Congress to declare war. The American people put a tremendous amount of pressure on the federal government to resolve the impressment controversy. Seamen's petitions and letters formed part of the public campaign for a stronger reaction to British belligerence. Hunt oversimplified the causality of the war, but he was also correct to assert the importance of the tars themselves.

Shortly after Hunt's history appeared, J.C. Gillebrand published a popular account, *History of the Late War between the United States and Great Britain*. Gillebrand deemed impressment the United States' most pressing grievance against Great Britain. Indian depredations on the frontier ran a close second. He stated that "No Algerine servitude could be worse" than impressment on a British man-of-war. Gillebrand labeled the practice "a distressing outrage," and "a barbarous state of slavery" and an act of "unparalleled insolence."<sup>30</sup> Despite the United States' repeated pacific overtures, Great Britain's aggression was never relented. Britain forced the United States into war. The U.S. government had to protect American citizens on the high seas, as well as those populating the frontier.

In yet another history of the War of 1812 published in 1817, Henry M. Breckenridge noted impressment's importance. Breckenridge did not glance over the trade disputes with England that also weighed in on the decision for war, but he did deem seaman abductions to be "of a nature more vexatious" than the Orders in Council. His book thoroughly reviewed the debate over citizenship versus subjecthood – in far greater

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<sup>30</sup> J.C. Gillebrand, *History of the Late War between the United States and Great Britain, Containing an Accurate Account of the Most Important Engagements on Sea and Land* (Baltimore: Shaffer & Maund, 1817), 9-10.

detail than any of the other *causus belli* about which Breckenridge wrote. He argued that impressment was an issue “upon which American feeling has always been very much alive.” Breckenridge described impressment as, “hateful bondage,” and “the worst slavery,” as well as “an egregious insult.”<sup>31</sup>

These are just several examples of how historians treated impressment in early works on the War of 1812. Each of these histories sold well. Gilbert Hunt’s volume went through several printings. Various education reformers endorsed the third edition as a children’s schoolbook. Gillebrand’s history quickly sold through three editions within a year of its initial release. Brackenridge’s book, meanwhile, was the most successful. His went through six different editions – the last being in 1836 – as well as a French translation. Although there were numerous works written on the war during the decades after the Treaty of Ghent, these three stand as among the most popular, and thus most influential in establishing the memory of the war.<sup>32</sup>

When one considers all these materials – the seaman narratives, the songs and poems, and the histories – the importance of establishing impressment as an indisputable wrong perpetuated against the United States becomes clear. The triumphalist account that grew around the conflict began with impressment. Seaman abductions solidified America as the aggrieved party and England as the aggressor.

The narrative fit well with the rampant Anglophobia that abounded in the nineteenth-century United States. Americans of the early national period attempted to

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<sup>31</sup> Henry Breckenridge, *History of the Late War between the United States and Great Britain Comprising a Minute Account of the Various Military and Naval Operations* (Baltimore: Cushing & Jewett, 1817), 17-18.

<sup>32</sup> The information on the number of editions for each work was gathered from [www.worldcat.org](http://www.worldcat.org).

establish a distinct American identity by adopting an anti-British mentality. The majority of Americans bore an ingrained resentment toward England, which played an important role in the memory of the War of 1812. Americans quickly came to identify the conflict as “the second war for independence.” The people of the United States saw the war as not just a fight over impressment, or frontier depredations, or even national honor, but rather a struggle for the United States’ continued existence. When Americans observed the War of 1812 through such a prism, they could dismiss the military disasters, the political divisiveness, and the massive debt incurred by the conflict. Such setbacks and sacrifices mattered little. In the end, the United States had defended its liberties and maintained its freedom from the machinations of Great Britain. Impressment was the most obvious tactic utilized by the British to endanger America’s future. What threatened the young republic’s independence more than Great Britain stripping Americans of their citizenship and forcing them to serve under the Union Jack? Did anything signify England’s disregard for the United States more than treating American citizens like British subjects? The dichotomy created between the virtuous United States and corrupt Great Britain guaranteed impressment’s pivotal role in the memory of the War of 1812, even if the Treaty of Ghent left the issue unresolved.<sup>33</sup>

Impressment bequeathed another legacy; one that is not as obvious, but significant nonetheless. The anti-impressment movement in the United States played a part in growing the nation’s anti-slavery movement. Impressment raised the awareness of some

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<sup>33</sup> Sam W. Haynes, *Unfinished Revolution: The Early American Republic in a British World* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2010), is a great look at Anglophobia in the United States. Haynes does not discuss impressment in his work, but it is easy to see how seaman abductions fit neatly into American fears.

Americans to the immorality of bondage and forced labor. Such observations began with the seamen themselves, but spread among the populace.

It was not uncommon for an impressed seaman to compare his situation to that of African slaves in America. Sometimes seamen implied anti-slavery feelings in their writings rather than openly declare their sympathies. David Bunnell, for instance, came to hate the idea flogging, or whipping, as a form of discipline after falling victim to the lash multiple times while impressed by the British. “What must these unfeeling wretches think, when treating their fellow creatures with such cruelty? This treatment, though it grieves me to say it, is not altogether confined to the British Navy.”<sup>34</sup> Although Bunnell’s writing can be read as an indictment of flogging in the US Navy, contemporary readers inevitably drew connections to American chattel slavery as well. James Durand related how the English would flog Americans who protested their condition. During the War of 1812, Durand and two other pressed Americans refused to participate in the attack on Stonington, Connecticut. The British captain had halters (a noosed strap used for leading and tethering beasts of burden) placed about their necks. He fed them maggoty bread, and finally clamped the men in irons.<sup>35</sup> Durand’s writing has a distinct anti-slavery tone. He condemned tyranny and violence and extolled the virtues of self-worth and liberty.

Some sailors were more explicit with their anti-slavery sentiments.

Massachusetts tar Moses Smith related in his memoirs the desperate measures taken by one “colored seaman belonging to New York” who hoped to avoid impressment. The man seized an ax and cut all four fingers off of his right hand and declared, “Now let the

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<sup>34</sup> Bunnell, *Travels and Adventures of David C. Bunnell*, 98.

<sup>35</sup> Durand, *The Life and Adventures of James Durand*, 75-6.

English take me, if they want me.” Smith found the man’s actions heroic. “There are exalted qualities often concealed beneath a darkened skin,” Smith concluded.<sup>36</sup> When Benjamin Waterhouse published his journal in 1816, he drew many comparisons between impressment and slavery. Waterhouse was a surgeon on an American privateer during the war. The British captured his ship was captured and Waterhouse became a prisoner. Before the British made the young doctor and his fellow crewmen, they examined the Americans for any Crown subjects hiding among their crew. The Royal Navy did not cease impressments simply because Great Britain and the United States were at war. Waterhouse and the men were “driven . . . up in a corner like hogs, and then marched about the deck, for the strutting captain to view and review us like cattle in the market before a drover or butcher.” Later in his book, Waterhouse offered another description of impressment. “The boarding officer . . . would muster the crew and examine the persons of the sailors, as the planter examines a lot of negroes exposed for sale.” Waterhouse, once aboard a Royal Navy frigate, understood the horrid conditions described by impressed seamen and their sympathizers.

Governor Gerry . . . when speaking of the impressment and ill usage of our seamen by the English, calls a British man of war ‘a floating Pandemonium.’ I never felt the force of that expression until I entered on board this floating hell. . . . I measured the misery of those around me by what I myself suffered. Shut up in the dark with ninety-nine distressed young men, like so many *galley slaves, or Guinea negroes*, excluded from the benefit of common air, without one ray of light or comfort, and without a single word expressive of compassion from any officer of the ship. I never was so near sinking into despair . . . I should have welcomed death.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Smith, *Naval Scenes in the Last War*, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin Waterhouse, *Journal of a Young Man of Massachusetts, Late a Surgeon Aboard an American Privateer Who was Captured at Sea by the British* . . . (Boston: Rowe and Hooper, 1816), 10, 65, block quote 28-29.

Waterhouse's depiction of impressment smacked of anti-slavery language and imagery. He equated British captivity to being treated like a "Guinea negro" with all the attendant misery. Impressment, like chattel slavery, was a dehumanizing process. It caused him and his comrades (and presumably thousands of American seamen before them) to fall into despondency. Waterhouse used the treatment of American seamen by the British to censure American conduct towards African slaves.

Seamen who experienced British captivity first-hand were not the only individuals to use impressment as a means of criticizing American slavery. Many printers employed impressment as an indirect method of attacking slavery. This was especially true for Republican printers. They could voice their opposition to chattel slavery without censuring the wealthy, powerful slaveholders on whose influence and largess printers often relied.

Solomon Southwick, printer of the *Albany Register*, wrote that impressment was "one of the vilest systems of cruelty and oppression" in history, but he made an exception – "save for the African slave trade." Southwick went on to call impressment "savage and horrible;" a practice which "the fiends of pandemonium could scarcely perpetuate without feeling the pangs of remorse, or yielding to the voice of oppressed humanity." Southwick wrote this in the context of African slavery being more inhumane than impressment. The subscribers of the *Register* did not have to read too deeply into Southwick's editorial to glean his stance on slavery and slaveholders.<sup>38</sup>

George Sherman ran the *Trenton Federalist*. Impressment disgusted him. Sherman could not overlook the similarities between British coercion and American bondage. "In your harbors and fishing grounds the haughty Britons seize your

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<sup>38</sup> "British Impressments," *Albany Register*, 10 March 1812.

unoffending and defenceless countrymen,” Sherman wrote, “and drags them into slavery almost as outrageously and as dreadful as your Democratic compeers of the southern states do the defenceless blacks in the arid regions of Africa.”<sup>39</sup> National politics obviously influenced Sherman. That does not mean his anti-slavery convictions were purely political. Historian Rachel Hope Cleves has persuasively demonstrated that modern scholars should not dismiss the anti-slavery convictions of Northeastern conservatives because of their anti-Jacobin overtones. Federalists could politicize their anti-slavery views and still be sincere in their convictions. Cleves explains that such issues as slavery and Jacobinism “were connected by a common concern: unrestrained violence could destroy civil society.”<sup>40</sup> Sherman, by couching his criticisms of slavery and Jeffersonians in terms of impressment, was able to use a topic on which Americans had reached consensus (the plight of captive seamen) to bring attention to a similar blight in the United States.

Federalists were not the only advocates for impressed tars who also linked the practice to American slavery. In Philadelphia, William Duane, as printer/editor of the *Aurora General Advertiser*, saw chained seamen and shackled slaves and could not help but combine his criticisms. Duane was more subtle than Southwick or Sherman, likely because of his close Republican ties. In an issue of the *Aurora General Advertiser* in which Duane declared in large bold type that 6,257 American seamen were being held in “British slavery,” the adjacent item was a scathing editorial on Virginia slavery. An impending vote in the Virginia General Assembly on the gradual emancipation of slaves

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<sup>39</sup> “Impressment of American Seamen,” *Trenton Federalist*, 12 August 1805.

<sup>40</sup> Rachel Hope Cleves, *The Reign of Terror in America: Visions of Violence from Anti-Jacobinism to Antislavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 106-07.

motivated Duane's anti-slavery comments. Duane's placement of the two editorials sent a clear message; if holding American seamen in bondage was wrong, was it not wrong to oppress Africans in a similar manner?<sup>41</sup> Duane's anti-slavery views often fluctuated. Historian Padraig Riley argues that Duane "was concerned with what he believed were more threatening forms of oppression," like impressment. Duane harbored anti-slavery sentiments, though, which he occasionally vented.<sup>42</sup> He believed slavery undermined democracy and republicanism. Duane was one of the leading advocates for the liberty of American seamen, so it was natural for him to link impressment and slavery.

Charles Holt, printer of the Jeffersonian *Hudson Bee*, also revealed his anti-slavery sentiment when he printed Venture Smith's autobiography. Smith was a former slave who had purchased his, and his family's, freedom. He worked his way to modest prosperity in Connecticut. At the age of sixty-nine, Smith chose to dictate the story of his life from a kidnapped prince of Africa to a Long Island slave to a New England farmer.<sup>43</sup> *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture* was a powerful and influential tract in the early republic. Holt never declared his motives for publishing Smith's work. His advocacy for captive seamen demonstrates sympathy for coerced laborers. Holt's concern for the oppressed reached beyond white American sailors and extended to enslaved Africans, as well. Interestingly, Holt's most stirring editorials against impressment came after his publication of Venture Smith's book.

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<sup>41</sup> "Constitution of Virginia" and "6,257," *Aurora General Advertiser*, 10 March 1812.

<sup>42</sup> Padraig Griffin Riley, "Northern Republicans and Southern Slavery: Democracy in the Age of Jefferson, 1800-1819," (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2007), 216-220, quote 216.

<sup>43</sup> Venture Smith, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventure of Venture, a native of Africa: but Resident Some Sixty Years in the United States of American* (New London, CT: Charles Holt, 1798).

Some political leaders joined seamen and printers in drawing connections between impressment and slavery. William Findley argued in the House of Representatives, “A man impressed is condemned to slavery of the worst kind. . . . We have not long since expressed a just abhorrence of slavery by a very unanimous vote of this house.” Findley was referring to the prohibition enacted against the African slave trade. “We have expressed a very commendable sympathy for the untutored sons of Africa,” Findley continued, “stolen or forced from their families and all that is dear to them; and shall we make no exertions to protect our own citizens from the worst kind of slavery.”<sup>44</sup> New Hampshire Representative William Claggett made an argument similar to Findley’s. “Humanity revolted at the idea of tearing the Africans at their native land and relatives of life. And shall we . . . who tread upon the sacred soil of liberty, feel a cold indifference to our wretched brethren immured in the floating prisons of England?”<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, Jonathan Russell, the American Charge d’Affaires to the Court of St. James at the outbreak of the War of 1812, drew on the comparison between slavery and impressment when criticizing the British. He failed to understand why British officials did not see their hypocrisy in impressment. “It was a matter of astonishment that while Great Britain discovered such zeal for the abolition of the traffic in barbarous and unbelieving Africans, so as to force it on her reluctant allies, that she could so obstinately adhere to the practice of impressing American citizens.”<sup>46</sup> Although none of these men condemned American chattel slavery outright, their words can be read as attempts to cast

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<sup>44</sup> “Congress of the United States, House of Representatives, Debate on Mr. Gregg’s Resolution,” *United States Gazette*, 18 April 1806.

<sup>45</sup> *Mercantile Advertiser*, 16 April 1804.

<sup>46</sup> *Essex Register*, 28 November 1812.

the plight of American seamen in the most desperate light. Each likened impressment to the coerced labor of Africans while simultaneously denouncing sailor abductions. A reader could have easily interpreted the speeches as a joint criticism of both labor systems.

Historian Paul Gilje has demonstrated how abolitionists and black seamen used anti-impressment rhetoric in the decades following the war. In 1822, South Carolina passed the first Negro Seamen Act, which required any free black sailor – foreign or domestic – entering the port of Charleston to be imprisoned until his vessel departed. It was incumbent upon the vessel’s captain to pay the cost of the crewman’s confinement; failure to do so resulted in the black seaman being sold into slavery. Georgia, North Carolina, Florida, Louisiana, and Alabama followed South Carolina’s lead.<sup>47</sup> Protestors of these draconian southern laws, including Frederick Douglas, adopted the 1812 slogan “Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights” to emphasize the tyrannical nature of the regulations. The correlation between British impressment and the Negro Seamen Acts was obvious. Six southern states claimed the right to imprison and enslave free seamen, just as the British had captured free American sailors and coerced their labor.<sup>48</sup>

There were also popular culture crossovers between the anti-impressment and anti-slavery movements. The most obvious appeared in the songbook, *American Muse*. The book was a collection of patriotic songs and sentimental ballads. *American Muse* contained several songs about impressment. It also featured three songs about the inhumanity of African slavery. “The Little Negro Boy” told of a slaveowner who

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<sup>47</sup> Philip M. Hamer, “Great Britain, the United States, and the Negro Seamen Acts, 1822-1848,” *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Feb. 1935), 3-28.

<sup>48</sup> Gilje, *Free Trade and Sailors Rights*, 224-36.

callously sells a young slave, tearing the boy away from his family. The slaveowner, afterward, wonders about the morality of slavery and his own worth after treating his fellow man so carelessly. “Negro and the Buckra Man” was written from the perspective of a slave who traders had stolen from the African shore. They forced the slave to convert to Christianity and beat him often. A series of immoral individuals owned the slave – drunks, sodomites, and crooks. He found happiness, though, when he fell in love. The song ends with the honest slave hoping to get into heaven when he dies, if the “Buckra man” (obviously the true sinner and a hypocrite and unworthy of the Lord’s paradise) will let him.<sup>49</sup> Finally, “The Desponding Negro” told the tale of an African man snatched from his hut while sleeping. Slave traders shackled him and forced him to labor aboard a merchant ship, described in the lyrics as “a dark floating dungeon.” Towards the end of the piece, there is a stanza that could have fit just as easily into an impressment ballad:

How disastrous my fate, freedom’s ground though I tread,  
Torn from home, wife and children, and wandering for bread,  
While seas roll between us which ne’er can be crossed,  
And hope’s distant glimmering in darkness are lost.<sup>50</sup>

It must have been impossible for anyone perusing the songs of *American Muse* not to make a connection between impressment and slavery. “The Galley Slave” exposed the reader to the hard fate of an impressed man, torn away from his loved ones and despairing of all hope. The reader saw the ordeals of an African slave detailed in exactly same way a few pages later. The songbook conveyed an obvious anti-slavery message.

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<sup>49</sup> *The American Muse, or the Songster’s Companion* (New York: Smith & Foreman, 1814), 15-6, 67-8.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 86-7.

Even if the majority of individuals who purchased *American Muse* ignored or overlooked the lesson, the printers ensured it was there. By including the three anti-slavery songs in a book otherwise filled with patriotic odes and sentimental ballads, the message was this; how could Americans claim the moral high ground over Great Britain because of impressment, when the people of the United States were guilty of enslaving countless Africans? The issue of slavery in the land of liberty was soon on the mind of every American. The War of 1812 removed any obstacle to American westward expansion and the Missouri crisis soon forced the nation to confront its own hypocrisy.

The impressment of American seamen was an important episode in the history of the United States. Each chapter of this dissertation demonstrated the ways in which the captivity of seamen affected various aspects of American society. Far more seamen fell victim to British press gangs than historians have previously accepted. The Royal Navy forced at least 15,000 Americans into British service. The distribution of these men's hometowns was not as heavily skewed towards New England as many contemporaries and historians have assumed. In fact, it was the mid-Atlantic states of New York and Pennsylvania that lost the most native sons taken up by the British. Southern states likewise suffered more from impressment than either contemporaries or historians assumed. Over a third of all impressed sailors hailed from a southern port town. Impressment was truly a national issue. The ramifications of impressment, therefore, affected the entire country.

The first consequence of impressment was the suffering of American seamen. Their time aboard a British man-of-war was a terrible ordeal for many. Discipline was

harsh, pay was minimal (or nonexistent), disease was prevalent, and crewmen all faced the perils of England's war against France. Many Americans regarded seamen as an important symbol of freedom and liberty as they carried the new nation's flag to cities across the globe. When the Royal Navy began pressing these men into British service, it delivered a blow to America's honor and staged an embarrassing display of the country's weakness compared to the great powers of Europe. For some Americans, though, the effects of impressment were more personal than questions of national honor. The wives and children of captive seamen endured considerable hardships during the absence of the male head of household. Child mortality rates in Philadelphia and New London increased during the two decade impressment controversy. Additionally, in New York City – and likely other large commercial centers – impressment put a strain on public welfare resources. A greater number of women and children took refuge in almshouses. These familial struggles were often used by newspapers, songsters and playwrights to dramatize for the wider American public the heartaches cause by impressment.

The people of the United States expected the Federal government to find a solution to impressment. Their expectations amplified as they gained an increased appreciation for the difficulties caused by impressment. The people brought pressure to bear on the United States government, Congress and the State Department, in turn, attempted to legislate or negotiate a settlement with Great Britain. Although Congress passed numerous pieces of legislation in hopes of providing American seamen with better protection from Royal Navy press gangs, it was to no avail. Likewise, the many different rounds of negotiations between American and British diplomats failed to find any headway in ending impressment. The tension between the two countries steadily

increased in no small part because of the unwillingness (from the American perspective) of Great Britain to recognize the United States' grievance against impressment.

The strain between the United States and Great Britain was not confined to the negotiating table or barbs traded in the newspapers. The two countries' navies grew increasingly aggressive toward one another during this time. The most notable eruption of hostilities occurred in June 1807 when HMS *Leopard* attacked the USS *Chesapeake* off the coast of Virginia. The incident brought two countries to the brink of war before President Jefferson decided to wage a trade war instead in the form of an embargo. After President Madison lifted the embargo, U.S. Navy leaders became eager to strike a blow against the Royal Navy. In the spring of 1811, the USS *President* pounded HMS *Little Belt* in a one-sided engagement. The *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair and the *President-Little Belt* incident were directly motivated by impressment. Both belligerent acts further eroded Anglo-American relations. Each clash sent the American and British public alike crying for war. In June 1812, those who wished for war were satiated.

The impetus for the War of 1812, as with all wars, was complex: trade restrictions, Indians affairs, and domestic politics all factored into the decision. Impressment, though, played an important role. The practice became a longstanding grievance between the United States and Great Britain that threatened American sovereignty and tarnished the nation's honor. Impressment was far more than just political fodder for President James Madison. Seaman abductions continued to be as major a stumbling block in Anglo-American affairs after Jefferson's embargo as they had been before 1808. "Being a true born American I think it very hard to be dragged into Slavery by a Nation to whom I don't belong," wrote Massachusetts seaman Stephen

Simmon in 1810. “The United States are universally acknowledged to be free and independent, therefore I wish to know why our natural rites [sic] are to be trampled on.” Simmon’s question was often repeated by his fellow tars, newspapers editors, congressmen, and Americans from all other walks of life. Impressment was not the only cause of the War of 1812, but it is difficult to imagine a second conflict between the United States and Great Britain if impressment had not been an issue.

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