Chapter 10 Lesson 3

A Time of Conflict

American Ships on the High Seas

In 1785 the ship Empress of China returned to New York from China. It was laden down with tea and silks and sold for a tremendous profit. This chance for profit inspired others to follow their example. Soon, American merchant ships were sailing the high seas from China and India to locations like South America, Africa and lands along the Mediterranean Sea.

In the mid 1790’s France and England were at war. French and British merchant ships stayed home to avoid being captured, American merchants took advantage of this. By 1800, nearly a 1,000 merchant ships were trading around the world.

Piracy on the Seas

The practice of piracy made some foreign waters dangerous. Pirates from the Barbary States of North Africa – Morocco, Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis – terrorized European sailing on the Mediterranean Sea.

These pirates demanded tribute be paid to them from these foreign governments in order for safe passage. If this tribute was not paid, the pirates attacked and took ships and imprisoned their crews. European countries often paid this tribute. They believed it was less expensive to pay the pirates than to go to war with them.

War With Tripoli

The Barbary States also demanded tribute of the US. In 1801 the ruler of Tripoli demanded even more money. President Jefferson refused to pay and Tripoli declared war on the United States. In response, Jefferson sent ships to blockade Tripoli.

In 1804 pirates seized the US warship Philadelphia. They towed the ship into Tripoli Harbor and threw the crew into jail. Stephen Decatur, a 25 year old US Navy captain, took action. He slipped into the heavily guarded harbor with a small raiding party. Decatur burned the Philadelphia to prevent the pirates from using it. A British admiral praised the deed as the “most bold and daring act of the age.”

The war ended with the signing of a peace treaty in June 1805. Tripoli agreed to stop demanding tribute, however the US had to pay $60,000 to release the captured American sailors. The US continued to pay the other Barbary States until 1816.

Violating Neutral Rights

Jefferson won reelection in 1804. The nation was at peace – but trouble is on the horizon. Across the Atlantic Ocean, Great Britain and France were fighting a war that threatened to interfere with American trade.

When Britain and France went to war in 1803, the US traded with both countries. By not taking sides in the conflict the US continued to trade with both countries. A nation not involved in a conflict enjoyed neutral rights, meaning its ships could sail the seas and not take sides.

American merchants prospered for two years. By 1805, however, Britain and France were each trying to block the other from trading with the US. Britain blockaded the French coast and threatened to search all ships trading with the French. France then announced that it would search and seize ships trading with Great Britain.

The British Abuse American Shipping

The British were desperate for sailors. Many of their own sailors had deserted due to the terrible living conditions – hard labor, harsh treatment, and terrible food – in the British Navy. British naval ships began stopping American ships to search for suspected British deserters. The British then forced the deserters to return to the British navy. This practice was called impressment.

While some of the sailors taken were British deserters, the British also impressed hundreds of native born or naturalized American citizens.

The British would often wait for American ships outside an American harbor, where they would then board and search them. In June 1807, the British war ship Leopard stopped the American vessel Chesapeake off the coast of Virginia. The Leopard’s captain demanded to search the Chesapeake for British deserters but the captain refused. In reply, the British opened fire, crippling the Chesapeake and killing 3 crew members.

When news of the attack spread, Americans reacted with an anti-British fury not seen since the Revolutionary War. Secretary of State James Madison called the attack an outrage. Many Americans demanded war against Britain, but President Jefferson wanted to avoid war.

More Problems for American Trade

When Britain violated America’s neutral rights, Jefferson banned some trade with Britain. After the attack on the Chesapeake, he took stronger measures.

Congress passed the Embargo Act in December 1807. An embargo prohibits trade with another country. The act targeted Great Britain, but the embargo banned imports and exports from all countries. Jefferson wanted to prevent Americans from using other countries as go-betweens for forbidden trade.

The embargo of 1807 was a disaster. With ships confined to their harbor, unemployment in New England rose. Without European markets, the South could not sell its tobacco and cotton. The price for wheat fell in the West, and river traffic stopped. Britain, meanwhile, simply bought needed goods from other countries. Congress repealed the Embargo Act in March 1809. In its place, it passed the Nonintercourse Act. This act, which prohibited trade with Great Britain and France, was also unpopular and unsuccessful.

The Election of 1808

Jefferson, following Washington’s precedent, made it clear he would not run for a third term as president. The Republicans chose James Madison from Virginia as their candidate. The Federalists hoped that voter anger over the embargo would help them win. They nominated Charles Pinckney. Pinckney carried most of New England, but the Federalists gained little support from the other regions. Madison won the presidency with 122 electoral votes to Pinckney’s 47 votes.

War at Home and Abroad

James Madison took office as president under unfavorable conditions. The nation was involved in the embargo crisis, and Britain continued to halt American ships. Cries for war with Britain grew louder.

War Looms

In 1810 Congress passed a new trade law. It would permit direct trade with either Britain or France, depending on which country first lifted its trade restrictions against the US. The British took no action, but Napoleon acted quickly, promising to end France’s trade restrictions.

In spite of that promise, the French continued to seize and sell American ships. On the verge of war, Americans were evenly divided only over who the enemy should be. Although angry over French actions, Madison believed Britain was the bigger threat to the US.

Broken Treaties

Madison also received news about the problems in the West. Ohio had become a state in 1803. White settlers wanted more land in the Ohio River Valley. Native Americans had already given up millions of acres. Now settlers were moving onto lands that were guaranteed to Native Americans by treaties.

As tensions grew, some Native Americans renewed their contacts with British agents and fur traders in Canada. Other Native Americans pursued a new strategy. Tecumseh, a powerful Shawnee chief, tried to build a confederacy among Native American nations in the Northwest.

Tecumseh wanted to halt white movement into Native American lands. He believed that a strong alliance – with the backing of the British in Canada – could achieve that goal. Tecumseh thought the treaties the US had made were worthless. “The Great Spirit gave this great island to his red children,” he said. No one nation had the right to give it away.

Working with Tecumseh was his brother, Tenskwatawa. Known as the Prophet, he urged Native Americans to return to their ancient customs. His message gained a large following. He founded Prophetstown in northern Indiana, where the Tippecanoe and Wabash Rivers meet.

Tecumseh Meets the Governor

The governor of the Indiana Territory, William Henry Harrison, became alarmed by the growing power of the two Shawnee brothers. Fearing that they would form an alliance with the British, Harrison sent Tecumseh a letter. He warned Tecumseh that the US had more warriors than all the Indian nations combined. Tecumseh replied to Harrison in person.

“Since the peace was made, you have killed some Shawnees, Delawares and Winnebagos. You have taken land from us and I do not see how we can remain at peace if you continue to do so. You try to force red people to do some injury. It is you that are pushing them on to some mischief….You try to prevent the Indians from doing as they wish – to unite and let them consider their lands common property of the whole.” – from The Centennial History of Oregon, 1811-1912 by Joseph Gatson

The Battle of Tippecanoe

Harrison attacked Prophetstown while Tecumseh was away trying to expand the confederacy. After more than two hours of battle, the Prophet’s forces fled battle. The Battle of Tippecanoe was a victory for the Americans, yet it came at a cost. After his people’s defeat, Tecumseh joined forces with the British who, people believed, had supplied his confederacy with guns.

The War Hawks Call for War

Meanwhile, President Madison faced demands for a more aggressive policy with Britain. The loudest voices came from a group of young Republicans known as the War Hawks. Led by Henry Clay of Kentucky and John Calhoun of South Carolina, they represented the West and the South.

The War Hawks supported increases in military spending and were driven by hunger for land. War Hawks from the West wanted the fertile forests of southern Canada, whereas the southerners wanted Spanish Florida. The War Hawks also wanted to expand the nation’s power. Their nationalism – or loyalty to their country – appealed to a renewed American patriotism.

Not everyone, however, wanted war. The Federalist in the Northeast remained strongly opposed to it.

The Eve of War

By the spring of 1812, knew that he could no longer avoid war with Britain. In a message to Congress on June 1, Madison asked them to declare war.

The British had already decided to end their policy of search and seizure of American ships. Unfortunately, news of Britain’s change in policy did not reach Washington D.C. until it was too late. Once set in motion, the war machine could not be stopped.