**The War of 1812**

“**Although President Madison stressed U.S. neutral rights as the principal reason for war, other reasons were probably far more important.”**

**Based on the documents you have read and your knowledge of the historical period,**

**Assess the validity of that statement for the period 1800-1812.**

For 22 years (1790-1812), the foreign policy of two Federalist presidents (Washington and Adams) and two Democratic-Republican presidents (Jefferson and Madison) had consistently focused on a single aim: avoiding war with a European power while at the same time defending U.S. neutral rights at sea. Finally however, as you read, a majority of Democratic-Republicans including the president decided in 1812 to abandon a policy of peace and neutrality in order to fight a war against Great Britain.

**What were the reasons for this change in policy from peace to war?**

The following documents from the congressional debate of December 1811 and the presidential war message of June 1812 provided some of the historical evidence.

1. According to John Randolph, in Document B, what was the real reason the war hawks wanted war with Britain?
2. In your opinion, did Senator German, in Document D, have a valid point that the United States was unprepared for war? Should the degree of preparedness be a major consideration when debating whether a nation should go to war?

**Document A: A War Hawk’s Argument for War**

***Source: Felix Grundy, a war-hawk representative from Tennessee, argued for war with Britain. The following in an excerpt from his speech in the House on December 9, 1811.***

“What, Mr. Speaker, are we now called on to decide? It is, whether we will resist by force the attempt, made by that Government [Britain], to subject our maritime rights to the arbitrary and capricious rule of her will; for my part I am not prepared to say that this country shall submit to have her commerce interdicted or regulated, by any foreign nation. Sir, I prefer war to submission.

Over and above these unjust pretensions of the British Government, for many years past they have been in the practice of impressing our seamen, from merchant vessels; this unjust and lawless invasion of personal liberty, calls loudly for the interposition of this Government. To those better acquainted with the facts in relation to it, I leave it to fill up the picture. My mind is irresistibly drawn to the West.

Although others may not strongly feel the bearing which the late transactions in that quarter [war with Tecumseh] have on this subject, upon my mind they have great influence. It cannot be believed by any man who will reflect, that the savage tribes, uninfluenced by other Powers, would think of making war on the United States. They understand, too well their own weakness, and our strength. They have already felt the weight of our arms; they know they hold the very soil on which they live as tenants at sufferance. How, then, sir, are we to account for their late conduct? In one way only; some powerful nation must have intrigued with them, and turned their peaceful disposition toward us into hostilities. Great Britain along has intercourse with those Northern tribes; I therefore infer, that if British gold has not been employed, their baubles and trinkets, and the promise of support and a place of refuge if necessary have had their effect.”

**Document B: Antiwar Views of an “Old Republican”**

***Source: John Randolph, a Republican Congressman from Virginia, led the faction of “Old Republicans” that opposed Jefferson’s and Madison’s leadership. He attempted to rebut the war hawks’ arguments pointing out their “true” motives for wanting war. The following in an excerpt from his speech in the House on December 16, 1811.***

“Sir, if you go to war it will not be for the protection of, our defence of your maritime rights. Gentlemen from the North have been taken up to some high mountain and shown all the kingdoms of the earth; and Canada seems tempting in their sight. That rich vein of Genesee land, which is said to be even better on the other side of the lake than on this. Agrarian cupidity, not maritime right, urges the war. Ever since the report of the Committee on Foreign Relations came into the House, we have heard but one word – like the whip-poor-will, but one eternal monotonous tone – Canada! Canada! Canada!...it is to acquire a prepondering northern influence, that you are to launch into war.”

**Document C: Madison’s War Message to Congress**

***Source: President Madison’s arguments for going to war with Britain in 1812 were summarized in the following written message to both houses of Congress on June 1, 1812.***

“British cruisers have been in the continued practice of violating the American flag on the great highway of nations, and of seizing and carrying off persons sailing under it, not in the exercise of a belligerent right founded on the law of nations against an enemy….British jurisdiction is this extended to neutral vessels belong….

Against this crying enormity, which Great Britain would be so prompt to avenge if committed against herself, the United States have in vain exhausted remonstrances and expostulations….The communication passed without effect.

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

In reviewing the conduct of Great Britain toward the United States, our attention is necessarily drawn to the warfare renewed by the savage on one of our extensive frontiers – a warfare which is known to spare neither age nor sex and to be distinguished by feathers peculiarly shocking to humanity. It is difficult to account for the activity and combinations [alliances] which have for some time been developing themselves among tribes in constant intercourse with British traders and garrisons without connecting their hostility with that influence and without recollecting the authenticated examples of such interpositions heretofore furnished by the officers and agents of that Government.

Such is the spectacle of injuries and indignities which have been heaped on our country, and such the crisis which its unexampled forbearance and conciliatory efforts have not been able to avert.”

**Document D: Unprepared for War**

***Source: Arguing against the war on the floor of the Senate on June 13, 1812, Obadiah German stressed that the nation was militarily unprepared to fight Britain.***

“Before we take the step proposed by the bill before us [war], I think we ought to also make some calculation on the general state of the nation. Except some trifling Indian war, it will be recollected we have been twenty-nine years at peace, and have become a nation, in a great degree, of active moneymakers. We have lost much of the spirit of war and chivalry possessed by our Revolutionary fathers; and we are people, also, not overfond of paying taxes to the extent of our ability; and this because our purses have been sweated down by our restrictive system till they have become light….

I do not, Mr. President, draw all those discouraging pictures, or relate these lamentable facts, because I would shrink from the conflicts or terrors of war, for the defense of the rights of my injured country, sooner than any gentlemen of this Senate, nor with a wish that all these evils may be realized; my object is to avert them from my country prematurely into a war without any of the means of making the war terrible to our enemy, and with the certainty that it will be terrible to ourselves, or at least to our merchants, our seaports, and cities.”