

1812: Congress's First Declaration of War Under the Constitution

Handout 2: Congressional Debate on Declaring War in 1812

A.	REPORT OF THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS: To sum up, in a word, the great causes of complaint against Great Britain, your committee need only say—That the United States as a sovereign & independent power, claim the right to use the ocean, which is the common & acknowledged highway of nations, for the purposes of transporting, in their own vessels, the products of their own soil, and the acquisitions of their own industry, to a market in the ports of friendly nations: and to bring home, in return, such articles as their necessities or convenience may require—always regarding the rights of belligerents, as defined by the established laws of nations. Great Britain, in defiance of this incontestable right, captures every American vessel bound to, or returning from, a port where her commerce is not favoured; enslaves our seamen; and, in spite of our remonstrances, perseveres in these aggressions. November 29, 1811
B.	REP. PETER PORTER: “We were a young nation, and he hoped we cherished a little pride and spirit, as well as a great deal of justice and moderation. Our situation was not unlike that of a young man just entering into life, and who, if he tamely submitted to one cool, deliberate, intentional indignity, might safely calculate to be kicked and cuffed for the whole of the remainder of his life; or, if he should afterwards undertake to retrieve his character, must do it at ten times the expense which it would have cost him at first to support. We should clearly understand and define those rights which as a nation we ought to support, and we should support them at every hazard. <i>Annals of Congress</i> , December 6, 1811
C.	REP. JOHN RANDOLPH: “If you go to war it will not be for the protection of, or defense of your maritime rights. Gentlemen from the North have been taken up some high mountain and shown all the kingdoms of the earth; and Canada seems tempting to their sights...Agrarian cupidity, not maritime rights, 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.” <i>Annals of Congress</i> , December 16, 1811
D.	CITIZENS OF ANNE ARUNDEL COUNTY, MD: To the Honorable The Congress of the United States ...It is urged, that war is the only recourse now remaining to vindicate our national honor and restore our national rights. Honor is an indefinite term: applied to individuals it is frequently considered as paramount to the duties of religion morality and law...If such is its meaning when applied to nations, we protest against it; the United States are, in the aggregate, a moral and religious people; they have not made honor an object of their federal compact; it is a term nowhere found in the instrument; the constitution speaks of common defense and repelling invasions, but offensive war, or the invasion of other countries never, we believe, was contemplated by those who framed or ratified it... Signed by Charles Carroll of Carrollton and 41 others, June 13, 1812
E.	SEN. OBADIAH GERMAN: “I will first call the attention of the Senate to the ability and strength of the nation we are about, by this bill, to declare war against. Gentlemen ought to recollect, that Great Britain has been almost constantly engaged in war for twenty years past against one of the most powerful nations that ever existed...Is Great Britain less powerful now, than she was twenty years ago? No, sir, the constant warfare has increased her powers instead of diminishing them.” <i>Annals of Congress</i> , June 13, 1812