

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

Handout 3: "War Manifesto"

House Foreign Relations Committee Report on a Declaration of War (excerpts)
June 3, 1812; Records of the U.S. House of Representatives
National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.

Reported to the House of Representatives, June 3, 1812

Mr. Calhoun, from the committee of Foreign Relations, to whom was referred the message of the President of the United States of the 1st of June, 1812, made the following report:

That, after the experience which the United States have had of the great injustice of the British Government towards them, exemplified by so many acts of violence and oppression, it will be more difficult to justify to the impartial world their patient forbearance than the measures to which it has become necessary to resort, to avenge the wrongs, and vindicate the rights and honor of the nation. Your committee are happy to observe, on a dispassionate review of the conduct of the United States, that they see in it no cause for censure.

If a long forbearance under injuries ought ever to be considered a virtue in any nation, it is one which peculiarly becomes the United States. No people ever had stronger motives to cherish peace; none have ever cherished it with greater sincerity and zeal.

But the period has now arrived when the United States must support their character and station among the nations of the earth, or submit to the most shameful degradation. Forbearance has ceased to be a virtue. War on the one side, and peace on the other is a situation as ruinous as it is disgraceful. The mad ambition, the lust of power, and commercial avarice of Great Britain, arrogating to herself the complete dominion of the ocean, and exercising over it an unbounded and lawless tyranny, have left to neutral nations an alternative only between the base surrender of their rights, and a manly vindication of them. Happily for the United States, their destiny, under the aid of Heaven, is in their own hands. The crisis is formidable only by their love of peace. As soon as it becomes a duty to relinquish that situation, danger disappears. They have suffered no wrongs, they have received no insults, however great, for which they cannot obtain redress...

From this review of the multiplied wrongs of the British Government since the commencement of the present war, it must be evident to the impartial world that the contest which is now worked on the United States is radically a contest for their sovereignty and independence....The control of our commerce by Great Britain, in regulating at pleasure, and expelling it almost from the ocean; the oppressive manner in which these regulations have been carried into effect, by seizing and confiscating such of our vessels, which their cargoes as were said to have violated her edicts, often without previous warning of their danger; the impressments of our citizens from on board our own vessels, on the high seas, and elsewhere, and holding them in bondage till it suited the convenience of their oppressors to deliver them up, are encroachments of that high and dangerous tendency, which could not fail to produce that pernicious effect; not would those be the only consequences that would result from it. The British Government might, for a while, be satisfied with the ascendancy thus gained over us, but its pretensions would soon increase. The proof which so complete and disgraceful a submission to its authority would

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afford of our degeneracy, could not fail to inspire confidence that there was no limit to which its usurpations and our degradations might not be carried.

Your committee believing that the freeborn sons of America are worthy to enjoy the liberty which their fathers purchased at the price of so much blood and treasure, and seeing in the measures adopted by Great Britain a course commenced and persisted in which must lead to a loss of national character and independence, feel no hesitation in advising resistance by force, in which the Americans of the present day will prove to the enemy and to the world, that we have not only inherited that liberty which our fathers gave us, but also the will and power to maintain it. Relying on the patriotism of the nation, and confidently trusting that the Lord of Hosts will go with us to battle in a righteous cause, and crown our efforts with success, your committee recommend an immediate appeal to arms.