



CHAPTER V.

FIRST TERM OF MADISON'S ADMINISTRATION.

THOMAS JEFFERSON retired from the presidency at a very critical period. "His policy of peace,—of commercial restrictions, moral philosophy, and dry docks,"—was pursued until the nation was on the verge of internal and external war. The overbearing and unjust measures of France and England respecting neutrals could no longer be patiently endured. England still looked with jealousy on the rising greatness of the American republic, and endeavoured to check it by low acts of diplomacy, by invading international rights, by encouraging hostilities among the Indians, by retaining possession of military posts north-west of the Ohio, and, above all, by seizing American vessels and impressing American sailors into her service. Still, Mr. Jefferson pursued a pacific and conciliatory policy, and was ably supported by his Secretary of State, James Madison, who conducted the most delicate negotiations with masterly ability.

When Mr. Jefferson retired, the eyes of the nation were fixed on Mr. Madison, as the only man who could bring existing difficulties to a successful termination; and he was accordingly chosen President of the United States. He was inaugurated in March, 1809; and George Clinton, of New York, was chosen Vice-President. Robert Smith, of Maryland, was appointed Secretary of State;

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 English aggressions: policy of Jefferson.

Madison chosen President.

His cabinet.

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Interdiction of commercial intercourse.

But the difficulties with foreign powers, which had originated during Washington's administration and increased during that of Jefferson, were no nearer a termination; indeed, they were more embarrassing and further from adjustment. Great Britain still continued to usurp the same power on the water that Napoleon did on the land; and the two great belligerents seemed to vie with each other in their disregard for the rights of neutrals. As a last resource, Congress prohibited all commercial intercourse with both Great Britain and France; still wishing, however, to preserve peace, the President was at the same time authorized to renew commercial intercourse so soon as these governments should repeal their obnoxious decrees and orders.

War declared against Great Britain.

In 1811, France reluctantly revoked the Berlin and Milan decrees; but the orders in Council were still continued by the British government, contrary to all justice and the mutual interests of the two nations. At this period, England had impressed from the crews of American merchant vessels, peacefully navigating the ocean, no less than six thousand seamen who claimed to be citizens of the United States, beside seizing and confiscating an immense amount of property. In view of these wrongs, Congress could hesitate no longer, and accordingly declared war against Great Britain (June 18th, 1812).

Opposition to the war.

The declaration of war was received by different parties with different feelings. The old Federalists strongly opposed the war, and palliated the unjust course which England had pursued on the ground of necessity. They

BR. VI.  
Ch. 5. maintained that the obnoxious orders were continued out of fear of Napoleon rather than disregard to the Americans, and that, as England was struggling for existence, A. D. 1812. it was ungenerous to take advantage of her critical situation. Moreover, they declared the nation unprepared for war, and predicted calamities which would more than balance the advantages to be gained. Nor did they believe that there was a sufficient cause of hostilities, or that the national honour was seriously compromised. Among the most violent opposers of the war were the clergy, the lawyers, and especially the merchants, of New England, who viewed with regret the withdrawal of their commerce from the ocean.

But, with a great majority of the nation, the war was popular. The preservation of national honour was regarded of more value than that of any material interests. Nor had hostility to England sufficiently abated since the Revolution, to allow the people to do justice to the course the English government felt constrained to pursue, while opposing a barrier to the career of Napoleon. Popularity of the war

There can be no doubt that the nation was not well prepared for a contest with England. Mr. Madison had indulged the hope that all difficulties would be settled, and Congress itself was averse to making those large appropriations necessary to conduct a war with success. The navy was insignificant. The army was small and not well organized. The treasury was empty, and money could only be raised by loans. Our geographical position was unfavourable. On the one side was Canada, well furnished with troops and all the munitions of war. On the north-west and south-west were lawless savages, unfriendly to the American cause, and embittered by English arts. On the south was Florida, occupied by Spanish troops. The old revolutionary generals were dead or Condition of the United States.

Bk. VI.  
Ch. 5. superannuated. The cabinet-ministers were unacquainted with military affairs. The community and Congress were divided as to the necessity of the war itself.

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1812. Such was the condition of the country when the war was declared. Henry Dearborn, who had been Secretary of War during Jefferson's administration, was appointed senior Major-General; under him were Major-Generals James Wilkinson, of Maryland, Wade Hampton, of South Carolina, William Hull, governor of Michigan Territory, and Thomas Pinckney, of South Carolina.

Hull on  
the fron-  
tier. In anticipation of hostilities, a large force was placed under the command of General Hull, in order that he might cut off all communication between the Northwestern Indians and the British posts in the Canadas. By some remissness in the War Department, the first intelligence of the declaration of war was received in Canada by the British themselves, before it was known on the frontier-posts. Consequently, Mackinaw, on the island of Michilimackinac, at the junction of Lakes Huron and Michigan, on the 17th of July, 1812, was surprised by the enemy and taken without resistance. This important post, the depôt of the fur-trade and the key of the Northwest, was thus unfortunately lost at the very outset.

Hull's  
invasion  
of Cana-  
da: his  
disasters  
and sur-  
render Hull meanwhile set out, with a force of volunteers and militia, from Detroit, his seat of government, to invade Canada, and issued pompous proclamations. But he met with nothing but a series of disasters, being opposed by General Brock, an able and experienced commander. His stores, despatches, and baggage were captured in a boat. A detachment of his forces was cut to pieces by Tecumseh, the Indian warrior. His army was discouraged by finding the savages more hostile than was expected. His flanks were in danger of an attack by the British, and his rear was not open to supplies. Under

these circumstances, he commenced a retreat (August 7th), ignominiously recrossed into Michigan, and (August 15th) surrendered, with his whole army, at Detroit, to General Brock, without striking a blow, or performing one gallant action, or even holding a council of war.

Thus was the war opened by the most disgraceful surrender of an American army to an inferior force, without exhibiting either courage or skill. The army, however, as well as the country, was indignant in view of this useless surrender, and Hull was tried by a court-martial for cowardice, convicted, and sentenced to be shot; but, being recommended to mercy, he was pardoned by the President, although dismissed from the service.

Before the surrender of Hull, a project had been laid before the War Department for the capture of Halifax, the principal naval depôt of the enemy; but the project was not then deemed feasible by Mr. Eustis, and it was accordingly abandoned, to be subsequently resumed.

The invasion of Canada, at this period, still occupied the attention of the American commander-in-chief, for which purpose 18,000 men were collected in various places on the frontier. These were distributed in three divisions: the first, under General Harrison, near the head of Lake Erie; a second, under General Van Rensselaer, at Lewistown, on Niagara river; and a third, under General Dearborn, in the vicinity of Plattsburg.

The division under Van Rensselaer, composed equally of regulars and militia, crossed the river, to attack the British on Queenstown Heights. The enterprise was gallantly conducted by the general, but was not properly sustained by the army, only a part of whom were willing to embark. Consequently, the assault was unsuccessful, although General Brock was killed. Of 1100 men who crossed the river, nearly all were killed, wounded, or

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Trial of  
Hull.

Medita-  
ted at-  
tack of  
Halifax.

Forces  
for the  
invasion  
of Cana-  
da.

Failure  
of Rens-  
selaer.

Br. VI. taken prisoners. The battle was lost for want of discipline. The troops would not obey the orders of the general — and no courage can atone for disobedience.

A. D. 1812. The unlucky and not very creditable campaign of 1812 was closed by a feeble attempt of General Dearborn to invade Canada. He commanded full 6000 men, and was well provided with money and the munitions of war; but after a miserable skirmish he relinquished the enterprise and retired to winter-quarters. All that can be said in his justification is, that his militia refused to cross the line, regarding themselves as called out to resist invasion, not to carry on offensive operations in the enemy's country.

The first year of the war would have ended in a total eclipse of glory and honour, had it not been for some brilliant naval encounters. The infant navy accomplished wonders, and partially redeemed the misfortunes of the army.

Capture of the Guerriere and Frolic. On the 19th of August, three days after the surrender of Hull at Detroit, the frigate Constitution, commanded by Captain Hull, captured the British frigate Guerriere, with the loss of only seven killed and seven wounded — one of the most brilliant naval exploits on record. On the 17th of October, the English brig Frolic surrendered to the American sloop of war Wasp, commanded by Captain Jones. The loss of the Frolic was thirty killed and fifty wounded; that of the Wasp was five killed and five wounded. But both these vessels were subsequently recaptured by a British seventy-four.

Capture of the Macedonian and Java. These successes were followed by others scarcely less brilliant. On the 25th of October, Captain Decatur, of the frigate United States, captured the Macedonian, a frigate of the largest class, with the loss only of seven killed and five wounded, while the Macedonian lost thirty-six killed and sixty-eight wounded. On the 29th of December,

the Constitution, then commanded by Commodore Bainbridge, achieved a second victory, off San Salvador, by capturing the British frigate Java, in a short but severe action. Besides her crew of four hundred men, the Java had on board one hundred men designed for the British service in the East Indies. Her commander, Captain Lambert, was mortally wounded, and sixty of her men were killed and one hundred and twenty wounded. The Constitution had nine killed and twenty-five wounded. The prize, however, was a complete wreck, and could not be brought into port.

These unexpected successes on the ocean raised the spirits of the Americans, so much mortified by the disasters and disgrace which had accompanied the operations of the army. Before the meeting of Congress, in November, nearly two hundred and fifty English vessels were captured, upwards of fifty of which were armed, carrying more than six hundred guns.

Throughout the country, confidence was inspired, and a general enthusiasm prevailed. Numerous volunteer corps were formed, and tendered their services to the government. This patriotic spirit manifested itself especially in the alacrity displayed by the people in Western Pennsylvania, Virginia, Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee. Even females, of every condition and age, voluntarily engaged in the work of preparing clothing and knapsacks for their relations and friends.

The President, in his message to Congress, which had Message to Congress. reassembled (November 2d) for a short session, did not attempt to conceal the misfortunes of the army on the Canadian frontier, and which, he did not hesitate to say, had partly resulted from the want of proper spirit and patriotism in the governors of Massachusetts and Connecticut, who were opposed to the war.

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Capture of English vessels.

Enthusiasm of the people.

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1812.

Supplies  
voted  
by Con-  
gress.

Congress ordered the construction of four ships of the line, six frigates, and six sloops of war, and passed an act for a loan of sixteen millions of dollars, and also for the issue of five millions of treasury notes. This sum, including the loan of eleven millions, authorized on the 14th of March, and five millions of treasury notes, on the 30th of June, made the appropriations for the prosecution of the war amount altogether to thirty-seven millions of dollars in one year.

Distin-  
guished  
mem-  
bers of  
Con-  
gress.

About this time, several men, since distinguished in the congressional annals of the country, entered the national legislature. Among these was Henry Clay, then Speaker of the House, Daniel Webster, who represented a district in New Hampshire, Jeremiah Mason, Charles J. Ingersoll, John Forsyth, Richard Stockton, John W. Eppes, Timothy Pickering, and Timothy Pitkin. Rufus King was then the leader of the minority, or the anti-war party, in the Senate.

Presi-  
dential  
election.

The presidential contest was animated in the Eastern States; but only a slight opposition was made to Mr. Madison in the South and West, and he was re-elected by a large majority. Elbridge Gerry, of Massachusetts, was elected Vice-President, over George Clinton. During the winter, some changes took place in the cabinet. William Jones, of Pennsylvania, was appointed Secretary of the Navy, in the place of Hamilton; and General Armstrong, late minister to France, Secretary of War, instead of Dr. Eustis.

1813.

Russia  
offers  
her me-  
diation.

Soon after Madison was inaugurated a second time, Russia, which had suffered from the interruption of American commerce, offered her mediation between the belligerent parties. The President accepted the offer, and appointed John Quincy Adams, Albert Gallatin, and James A. Bayard, envoys extraordinary and ministers

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plenipotentiary, to conclude a treaty of peace, under the auspices of the Russian Emperor Alexander; but Great Britain, unwilling to abandon her pretensions, declined the proffered mediation. The United States had no other course than to prosecute the war, which will be considered in the next chapter.