

Wade G. Dudley. THAT SPLINTERED WALL: THE BRITISH BLOCKADE OF THE UNITED STATES, 1812-1815. (Under the direction of Dr. Michael A. Palmer) Department of History, November, 1997.

The purpose of this thesis is to challenge the existing interpretation of the effectiveness of the British blockade of the United States during the War of 1812. Historians, especially noted naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan, portray the blockade as extremely effective. It annihilated American commerce and coasting, while paralyzing the U.S. Navy. The damage done to the United States by the British blockade was instrumental in achieving a final peace.

This thesis relies on the same source documents available to previous historians, as well as upon numerous secondary works. Interpretation is based upon two factors. The first factor is analysis of blockade theory as it had developed by 1812, and upon the realistic expectations of a blockade in that era. The second factor is the use of quantifiable data to measure the actual effectiveness of the blockade. Such qualities as civilian outrage and national morale, along with a host of other difficult to quantify concepts, are not eliminated from the interpretive process, but are weighted less than what can be actually measured.

Analysis indicates that the blockade, though not ineffective, was much less effective than historians have expressed to date. The Royal Navy could not contain American raiders in port, and was unable to protect its own merchantmen from those raiders. The commerce of the United States was greatly reduced, though the coasting trade continued reasonably strong throughout the war. Neither carriers nor coasters were

annihilated. Finally, the blockade was instrumental to the Treaty of Ghent, though as much in the sense of a self-inflicted British wound as in any positive measure.

That Splintered Wall
The British Blockade of the United States, 1812-1815

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in History

by

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November 10, 1997

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Introduction

The blockade is one of the oldest stratagems in naval theory. In the ancient and medieval worlds it was a tactical tool complimenting siege warfare. By the early 1700s changes in naval warfare had given the blockade an operational emphasis. Entire coasts and nations could be interdicted for months or years as long as sources of resupply and repair existed nearby.

By 1812, the art of blockade had matured to the strategic level in the hands of Great Britain's Admiralty and Royal Navy. Militarily, it was a weave of defense and offense, protecting Britain's vital seaways as it projected force against an enemy's coast. When turned against an opponent's commerce, the blockade halted international trade and disrupted coastal traffic. The resulting economic dislocation injured the enemy and allowed alert British merchants to expand into the newly created vacuum in the international market. Finally, the British blockade was a political hammer held over the heads of all maritime nations. To anger Great Britain risked the hammer's fall.

On June 18, 1812, the United States, with full knowledge of British maritime capabilities, declared war on Great Britain.¹ The causes of the conflict, viewed in the light of nearly two hundred years of historical analysis, bear a strong resemblance to the fabled Gordian Knot. President James Madison, in his war message to Congress, listed three maritime issues — impressment, sovereignty, and interference with commerce — and

¹President James Madison's War Message to Congress of June 1, 1812, *National Intelligencer* (Washington, D.C.), June 18, 1812.

incitement of Indians as his reasons for war.² Historians, through 1900, concurred with Madison.³ In 1905, Alfred Thayer Mahan added American military unpreparedness as a cause of war.⁴ Twenty years later Louis M. Hacker introduced the American land hunger thesis to explain Canada as a military objective, while Julius W. Pratt offered sectional politics as a cause of war.⁵ George R. Taylor and Margaret K. Latimer stressed agricultural economics in the West and South as a basis of conflict.⁶ During the 1960s, Norman K. Risjord and Bradford Perkins championed nationalism and the search for national respectability. Perkins also identified the bipolar international situation as a major contributor to war.⁷ Finally, Donald R. Hickey theorized that the Republican party

²*Ibid.*

³Henry M. Brackenridge, *History of the Late War Between the United States and Great Britain* (Philadelphia, 1839); Charles J. Ingersoll, *History of the Second War Between the United States of America and Great Britain, Declared by Congress the 18th of June, 1812, and Concluded by Peace the 15th of February, 1815* (Philadelphia, 1852); Benson J. Lossing, *Pictorial Fieldbook of the War of 1812* (New York, 1868); Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812* (Reprint of 1882, Annapolis, Md., 1987); Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America*, 9 vols. (New York, 1891-1896).

⁴Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Sea Power In Its Relations To The War Of 1812*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1905). Mahan also added the Francophilia and Anglophobia stemming from the Revolutionary War as a cause of war.

⁵Louis M. Hacker, "Western Land Hunger and the War of 1812: A Conjecture," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 10 (March, 1924), 365-395; Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1812* (Reprint of 1925, Gloucester, Mass., 1957).

⁶George R. Taylor, "Agrarian Discontent in the Mississippi Valley Preceding the War of 1812," *Journal of Political Economy*, 39 (September, 1931), 471-505; Margaret K. Latimer, "South Carolina — A Protagonist of the War of 1812," *American Historical Review*, 61 (November, 1956), 914-929.

⁷Norman K. Risjord, 1812: "Conservatives, War Hawks, and the Nation's Honor," *William & Mary Quarterly*, third series, 28 (April, 1961), 196-210; Bradford Perkins, *Prologue to War: England and the United States, 1805-1812* (Berkeley, Calif., 1961).

deliberately led the nation to war in order to consolidate its power.⁸ Though historians disagreed on the causes of the war, all agreed that Madison timed his action perfectly.

Between 1793 and 1815, Great Britain was embroiled with Revolutionary, then Imperial, France. Through 1814, the only cessation of the war was the brief Peace of Amiens. It marked the break between Revolutionary and Imperial France, for Napoleon Bonaparte crowned himself emperor in 1804.⁹ Through conquest and political maneuvering, Napoleon brought most of Europe under French hegemony. In June of 1812, only three nations — Russia, Great Britain, and tiny Portugal — resisted French control. Napoleon prepared to invade Russia with the largest army of contemporary times, while several of his best marshalls faced the British army in the Iberian Peninsula.

By 1812, the British navy was the largest such force in the world. It had captured all of the once numerous French colonies, and maintained a constant blockade of the European coast. Few French coasting vessels risked the blockade, and the large navies of France and its allies languished in port, unwilling or unable to face the vigilant British vessels. The danger from French naval raiders and privateers had virtually disappeared, and the numerous French seamen confined in British prisons and prison hulks attested to the effectiveness of British naval strategy.¹⁰

⁸Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: The Forgotten War* (Urbana, Ill., 1989).

⁹Trevor N. Dupuy, Curt Johnson, and David L. Bongard, *The Harper Encyclopedia of Military Biography* (Edison, N.J., 1995), 536-538. Numerous volumes have been written on Napoleon. Dupuy, Johnson, and Bongard offer a brief, accurate summary of his life and military career. For a fuller treatment, I suggest the works of David G. Chandler.

¹⁰G. J. Marcus, *The Age of Nelson: The Royal Navy, 1793-1815* (New York, 1971), 361-405.

The Royal Navy, however, was stretched exceedingly thin. The blockade demanded the bulk of its resources, each convoy required escorts, and roving patrols were needed to search for the few French raiders that reached the sea-lanes. The British army in Portugal, led by the capable Sir Arthur Wellesley, Viscount Wellington, requested constant support from the navy, while the Admiralty often dispatched squadrons to support allied nations (in 1812, Russia received such aid).¹¹ By June of 1812, the military assets of Great Britain were fully committed to the eventual defeat of Napoleon. Only a small squadron patrolled the coasts of North America, while a miniscule regular army contingent garrisoned Canada. Madison's declaration of war occurred at a most opportune moment.

The American government planned on a short war of only a few months duration. A quick seizure of Canada by the regular army and militia offered the means to force Great Britain to recognize and correct the grievances put forth by Madison in his war message. If Britain failed to do so, the rich lands of Canada could always be retained as spoils of war.¹² Unfortunately for the American cause, the invasion of Canada failed, and a stalemate developed. Instead of a few short months, the war lasted for thirty-three long months during which the coast of the United States came under British blockade.

¹¹Dupuy, Johnson, and Bongard, *Harper Encyclopedia*, 790-791. Wellesley was not named duke until May, 1814.

¹²Mahan, *Sea Power*, 1: 293-295.

At first glance, the blockade should have been overwhelming. The Royal Navy numbered 607 naval vessels, plus auxiliary cruisers, against the 16 ships of the U.S. Navy, aided by a few dozen gunboats designed for coastal support. Invariably, historians have recorded that the blockade proved highly effective, pinning American naval forces in their ports and halting virtually all American commerce. Mahan felt that American international commerce had been “annihilated” by 1814. G. J. Marcus applied the same term to the coasting trade in 1813.¹³ Mahan and Roosevelt viewed the military blockade as crippling to the U.S. Navy by late 1813 and 1814. In essence, the success of the better known blockade of France was rivaled by Britain’s interdiction of the United States.

This study questions the degree of effectiveness of the blockade. This should not be interpreted to mean that Britain’s wooden wall failed, for it did not. That wooden wall, however, was severely splintered, and the degree of effectiveness assigned to it by historians should be challenged.

Even the newspapers of Great Britain cried their concern in December 1814: “We have retired from the combat with the stripes yet bleeding on our back . . . with the bravest seamen and the most powerful navy in the world, we retire from the contest when the balance of defeat is so heavy against us.”¹⁴ Perhaps the *Times* was extremist, but the voicing of such feelings certainly implied less than total success for the blockading forces. The existence of some degree of ineffectiveness was reinforced by the *status quo ante-*

¹³*Ibid.*, 2: 21; Marcus, *Age of Nelson*, 467.

¹⁴London *Times*, December 31, 1814.

bellum mandated by the Treaty of Ghent. Finally, surviving writings of the British naval officers serving in the war often aired feelings of frustration directed at the weaknesses of their own superiors, as well as at the American ships that so often evaded the blockade.

The study of the historical blockade can be broken into three segments that correspond to the years of the war — 1812, 1813, and 1814-1815. British admirals tended to suspend offensive efforts during winter's inclement weather and concentrate on preparing for a new campaign in the spring and summer. Use of this division, though necessary, is somewhat artificial. Naval activity never completely stopped. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 address the three chronological periods of the war. They are data intensive, detailing the events of the blockade and the serious dilemmas faced by British commanders in the North American theater of operations. Chapter 6 offers analysis of the performance of the blockade throughout the war and discusses the reasons for its less than optimal performance.

Chapter I

Wind, Sand, and Sailors

For almost three years the conflict between the United States and Great Britain stretched across the world's sea-lanes.¹ The blockade, however, existed only off the coast of the United States. The length, terrain, and climate of that coast offered the single largest challenge to the Admiralty and its chosen commanders. As important to the story of the blockade as the American shore were the navies and merchant marines of the belligerents. The capabilities, as well as liabilities, of these organizations proved strong determinants in the final effectiveness of the blockade.

In 1812 the United States possessed slightly over one thousand miles of coastline bordering the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico.² This extensive interface is best examined in four geographic sectors — northern theater, mid-Atlantic theater, southern theater, and gulf theater.³ The northern theater (map 1) extended from the Canadian border to mid-New Jersey. The coastline ranged from dangerous rocks and shoals interspersed with small sand beaches to superb deep water ports and anchorages — Portland, Portsmouth, Newburyport, Boston, Newport, Stonington, New London, and New York City.⁴ Both Boston and New York City had developed into major entrepôts for the nation. Many

¹That fact in itself is a somewhat damning critique of the effectiveness of the British blockade.

²Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Fieldbook of the War of 1812* (New York, 1868), 235.

³The four regional maps at the end of this chapter were taken from Spencer C. Tucker, *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy* (Columbia, S.C., 1993), 113, 120, 139, and 156 in order of their appearance. The maps have been slightly modified.

⁴Eric C. F. Bird and Mannu Schwartz, eds., *The World's Coastlines* (New York, 1985), 213-219 and 224-227.

small villages and towns provided lesser docking facilities, usually for local fishermen and smugglers. The deep water ports were not, however, always approachable without problems. A series of sandbanks, virtually continuous, paralleled the length of the northern shores from New York to Labrador and eventually joined the Grand Banks. One of these sandbanks, Sandy Hook, barred the southern entrance to Long Island Sound. It allowed the passage of large vessels during only one hour of high tide.⁵

Climate proved a major concern for British officers. The normal Westerlies made blockade station keeping difficult in any stormy weather and favored escaping vessels, while the famed "Nor' Easters" threatened a lee shore during the long winter season, from November to March. The cold itself was a bitter enemy to the crew and tended to freeze furlled sails and rigging, slowing or negating the response to any blockade runner.⁶ Temperature inversions produced day-long fogs, at their worst from April to June. Lieutenant Henry Edward Napier, in the region during 1814 in H.M.S. *Nymphe*, cast additional light on weather severity:

In most climates we may expect fine weather after thunderstorms, but on this coast an almost constant fog, still and damp, reigns paramount throughout the months of April, May and June, with longer intervals of fine weather, as it approaches July, when its visits become less frequent and its continuance shorter. The only interruption to this detestable weather is storms and hard rain with now and then a gleam of sunshine, which seldom continues more than a few hours. I have been assured by several people that they have known these fogs to last three weeks, without the slightest intermission.⁷

⁵Tucker, *Gunboat Navy*, 115.

⁶Bird and Schwartz, *The World's Coastlines*, 213, 223.

⁷Henry E. Napier, *New England Blockaded in 1814: The Journal of Henry Edward Napier, Lieutenant in H. M. S. Nymphe*, edited by Walter Muir Whitehill (Salem, Mass., 1939), 11.

The mid-Atlantic theater (map 2) stretched from southern New Jersey to the Virginia-North Carolina border. As a vessel traveled south, the shores of the area quickly switched from shingle to sand, sometimes protected from Atlantic breakers by barrier islands, especially along the Maryland coast. As with the northern theater, sandbars existed close in to shore, often blocking even shallow draft vessels from crossing them at low tide. The critical aspect of this coast was the existence of two major bays, the Delaware and the Chesapeake.⁸ Philadelphia, crown of Pennsylvania and a deepwater port, stood on the banks of the Delaware River, emptying into the bay of the same name. Baltimore, near the head of the Chesapeake Bay, was capable of serving large draft vessels, and had assumed an importance for merchant shipping as great as that of New York and Boston. Philadelphia and Baltimore, closest export points for much of the United States' "bread basket" agricultural section, shared the bay's shipping with the smaller ports of Norfolk (deepwater) and Portsmouth as well as numerous fishing villages and small towns along the bays. Several rivers and creeks of varying navigability entered both bays. Often their heads of navigation (for floats and rowed vessels) extended several miles from the bays. They served as the region's highways, supporting small agricultural homesteads as well as fishing villages. These waterways also made ideal access points for smugglers and a final refuge for vessels endangered by nature or war.

Weather was less of a concern along this stretch of coast due to the ready shelter offered by the bays. Winters still presented extreme hazards due to ferocious onshore

⁸Bird and Schwartz, *Coastlines*, 213-219.

winds and freezing temperatures, but it was the summer that offered a threat less well known to the north — fever. The numerous marshes along the bays were breeding grounds for mosquitoes, and water, desperately needed by naval vessels, often lacked purity. The wealthier members of the local populace fled the yellow fever, malaria, and typhus epidemics during the summer. Naval forces did not share that option.⁹

The southern theater (map 3) encompassed the shores from North Carolina to Spanish Florida. Shoals and shifting sandbanks had earned it a reputation as the most treacherous of North American waters, especially off Capes Hatteras and Lookout in North Carolina. The sounds and coastal waters of that state were protected by a series of barrier islands extending from the Virginia border to Cape Lookout.¹⁰ The barrier was penetrated at Ocracoke inlet, navigable by vessels of ten feet or less draft. North Carolinians had developed a sizable trans-shipment business at the village of Portsmouth, transferring goods from deep draft ships to shallow draft coasters capable of sailing the local estuaries.¹¹

A similar chain of barrier islands stretched from Charleston to Amelia Island, though they were occasionally broken by short stretches of open water. Between islands and sand bars there existed only one true deepwater port in the South: Beaufort, South

⁹James Henderson, *Sloops and Brigs* (London, 1972), 44. The British navy's fear of disease was based on experience: one-third of a crew exposed to typhus in port inevitably died, while 40,000 men died of yellow fever in the West Indies from 1809 to 1812. Compare those losses to the 1,417 British dead at Waterloo or the 1,690 dead and wounded at Trafalgar. Note that northern cities also suffered from yellow fever epidemics, though with a lesser frequency.

¹⁰Bird and Schwartz, *Coastlines*, 207-211.

¹¹Tucker, *Gunboat Navy*, 138.

Carolina. Wilmington, located on the Cape Fear River, could take only medium draft or shallow draft vessels. Charleston could accommodate deep draft vessels (using local pilots) at high tide, and only shallow draft vessels at low due to its bar; while St. Marys, on the St. Marys River, could accommodate medium on high tides and larger vessels only on an extreme tide. Savannah, on the Savannah River, could take deep draft vessels, but careful pilotage was required.¹² Many smaller ports and villages also existed, usually supporting the local fishing industry and the coasting trade.

Weather in the south was much milder than in the northerly regions, though freezing temperatures and snow occasionally occurred. The true dangers came from sudden wintry easterly winds capable of changing shorelines overnight and driving unwary captains to their deaths on the many shoals and sand bars of the region. As in the Chesapeake Bay, the fear of summer diseases existed as a valid concern for ship captains.

The most recently acquired and settled portion of the United States was the gulf theater (map 4). Protected in places by large barrier islands at some distance from the mainland, the usually peaceful waters remained difficult to navigate without local pilotage due to sandbars and the ever-changing delta of the Mississippi River.¹³ New Orleans, outlet to the sea for all goods produced west of the Appalachians, was a deep water port (with pilotage) while Mobile, soon to be acquired from the Spanish, offered similar service. Coastal settlements were few because of the difficulty of the local terrain and the recent acquisition of the area by the United States.

¹²*Ibid.*, 140.

¹³*Ibid.*, 147-148.

Weather in the Gulf of Mexico was usually excellent year round, though disease remained even more of a concern for seamen. The normal weather did have an exception, however, that also applied to the entire coast of the United States. From June through October tropical waves formed off the African coast, many gathering force as they moved across the Atlantic towards the Caribbean, and then to North America. It was not unusual for hurricanes to reach 125 mph, and winds of 200 mph sometimes existed near the eyes of the storms. Most ships caught in their full fury simply disappeared; those on the edge of such storms could do little except lower topmasts and run before them on reefed sails. Nor were harbors always safe havens, for the tremendous storm surges ripped ships from anchor, while waterspouts and tornadic winds ravaged ships and port alike. These hurricanes had been known and feared since the times of Columbus, and merchants avoided the usual storm routes over the summer and autumn months. Such avoidance was another luxury unavailable to naval vessels, and Table 1 illustrates vividly the number of hurricanes that they needed to avoid during the War of 1812.¹⁴

The internal transportation system of the United States was just as important to the story of the blockade as the length of its coast. Roads were few and often no more than dirt traces, especially in the South and West. The economy relied on the country's many inland waterways for moving goods and people. In the West the primary routes of the

¹⁴Ivan Ray Tannehill, *Hurricanes* (Princeton, N.J., 1952), 11-34; Brian Lavery, *Nelson's Navy* (Annapolis, Md., 1994), 267-268; *The Niles Weekly Register*, April 2, 1814, reported USS *Alligator* sunk by a tornado at Port Royal; December 11, 1813, Niles reported (with slight exaggeration) damage to the British fleet in Halifax by a major storm; Napier, *Journal*, 3, discussed problems in the aftermath of that storm.

Ohio and Tennessee rivers drained into the Mississippi; thus, virtually all goods were funneled through New Orleans. In the South, several river systems led to the ports of Savannah, Charleston, Beaufort, and St. Marys, while North Carolina was blocked behind its Outer Banks in the north, leaving Wilmington on the far-ranging Cape Fear River as its only primary port. The rivers of the mid-Atlantic states emptied into the Chesapeake and Delaware bays.

Table 1 **Hurricanes During the War of 1812**

Date	Location	Notes
07/23/1812	Puerto Rico	
08/14/1812	Jamaica	08/19 to New Orleans
08/19/1812	Puerto Rico	
10/12/1812	Jamaica	10/14 to Cuba
07/20/1813	Bermuda	
07/22/1813	Dominica, Martinique	07/23 to Puerto Rico
??/??/1813	Dominica	
07/26/1813	Bahamas, Bermuda	
07/31/1813	Jamaica	08/05-09 over Atlantic
08/19/1813	Gulf Coast	
08/25/1813	Dominica	08/27 to Jamaica
08/27/1813	Charleston, S.C.	
09/07/1813	Leeward Islands	
11/19/1813	Nova Scotia	Fleet at Halifax damaged
??/??/1813	Belize	
07/01/1814	Charleston, S.C.	
07/22/1814	Puerto Rico	

Source: Ivan Ray Tannehill, Hurricanes (Princeton, N.J., 1952), 249-250.

The northern coast was protected by sand banks and small islands, similar to South Carolina and Georgia, though a plethora of ports offered superb deep water shipping accommodations.¹⁵ Some efforts at internal transportation improvements had been made, notably the Great Dismal Swamp Canal (opened 1812), but the declaration of war found

¹⁵Kenneth T. Jackson, *Atlas of American History* (New York, 1978), 94, 114-117, 124-125.

American commerce still funneled into relatively few ports, relying on the coasting trade instead of roads to move goods and travelers.¹⁶

Britain provided the major markets for American exports in the years leading to the War of 1812. British home markets, colonial markets, and the army in the Iberian Peninsula consumed tons of American wheat and provisions.¹⁷ Intrepid American merchants and captains continually pushed for new markets; by 1812 the American flag flew over merchant shipping and whalers across all the world's seas. Still, as with all other seamen, Americans found themselves at the beck and call of the winds and currents, and followed the traditional routes for sail driven vessels.

The Westerlies, blowing from North America to Great Britain, offered a quick passage, barring incident, of some three to four weeks. The return trip, either into the teeth of the stormy Westerlies on the northern route, or with more favorable winds and fewer storms (though often becalmed) on the southern route took five to twelve weeks. The impact on communications is readily visible: Orders that originated in Great Britain had a turn-around time of eight to twelve or more weeks; micro-management proved an impossibility. The admiral on station or the captain of a solitary naval vessel wielded

¹⁶Alexander Crosby Brown, *The Dismal Swamp Canal* (Chesapeake, Va., 1970), 48-49.

¹⁷United States Bureau of the Census, *The Statistical History of the United States From Colonial Times to the Present* (New York, 1976), 905, lists American exports for 1811 as \$61,000,000 with \$14,000,000 sold directly to the British Isles. An additional \$24,000,000 fell in the "Other" European countries category. Over 66 percent of this trade went to Portugal, supplying the British war effort. Finally, \$21,000,000 in trade occurred outside Europe, and by 1811, the only significant markets remaining for American produce and products outside Europe were British colonies.

tremendous power.¹⁸ Both the crown and the Admiralty expected them to be ambassador and warrior wherever they sailed, making the decisions best serving their nation. Success was mere duty — failure devastated careers. From that perspective, British and American navies were much alike.

The relatively young U.S. Navy may have been short on traditions and often short on government support, but it held some important advantages. Even the navy's small size (Table 3) was a blessing, of sorts, allowing all major units to be manned by experienced professionals upon the outbreak of war. The officer cadre had gained tremendous experience during the Quasi-War, campaigns against the Barbary pirates and piracy in home waters, anti-smuggling efforts under Jefferson's Restrictive Acts, and "Phony War" skirmishing against the British during the years before 1812. The Navy enlisted only volunteer crews, providing a level of seamanship — if not military discipline — unapproachable by newly fitted out British vessels, and often superior to vessels long on station. Men and officers received good wages, supplemented by prize money during times of conflict, though promotion for officers was exceedingly slow during peace — a fact that provided a good pool of junior leadership material to draw upon as the navy expanded.¹⁹ The overall command structure for the navy was minuscule, consisting of the

¹⁸Ian K. Steele, "Time, Communications and Society: The English Atlantic, 1702," *Journal of American Studies*, 1 (August 1974), 1-21. Though set more than one hundred years before the War of 1812, Steele's study remains highly relevant: the speed of maritime transport did not appreciably change before the introduction of the steamship. His championing of the emic viewpoint over the etic applies a normality to communications of the period otherwise lacking.

¹⁹Dudley W. Knox, *A History of the United States Navy* (New York, 1936), is recommended for supplementary reading on the period and the American Navy. E.B. Potter, *The Naval Academy Illustrated History of the United States Navy* (New York, 1971), 1-39, provides concise documentation and excellent illustrations of the navy through 1812. Edgar S. Maclay, *A History of American Privateers*

president of the United States who operated through the secretary of the navy and his tiny support staff, while Congress carefully controlled the purse strings. The naval rank of admiral remained unused; the purely administrative rank of "commodore" sufficed for squadron commanders. Each major port had naval facilities capable of at least restocking perishables and conducting minimal repairs, though all stations found themselves strained by the declaration of war.²⁰

The navalist-anti-navalist debate that had raged within Congress since the early 1790s determined the form and function of the navy. Navalists supported a large fleet with vessels capable of standing in a line of battle, securing proper recognition of the national flag, and protecting American mercantile interests abroad. Though handicapped by the expense of such an ambitious building program, it appeared that, under the last Federalist president, navalists had triumphed. In 1800, however, the election of Thomas Jefferson and his concentration on budget reductions allowed anti-navalists to end the planned building of a battle fleet. Most anti-navalists did not support complete abolition of maritime resources; rather, they felt that the fleet should be tied directly to defense of American waters.²¹ Ideally, a small fleet not only cost less to operate and maintain, it

(New York, 1924), 8-9, discusses the laws of April 13, 1800, and June 26, 1812, which defined prize money.

²⁰Captain John H. Dent to Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton, June 4, 1812, William S. Dudley, *et al.*, ed., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* (Washington, D.C., 1992), 1:128-130, provided a listing of numerous stores needed at Charleston and Wilmington. Commodore Thomas Tingey to Hamilton, June 22, 1812, *Ibid.*, 1:145, requested quick delivery of spars to the Washington Navy Yard for Congress.

²¹Craig Symonds, *Navalists and Anti-Navalists: The Naval Policy Debate in the United States, 1785-1827* (Newark, Del., 1980), 107-108. This is the definitive study of the debates.

avoided embroiling the United States in European wars while proving adequate to defend the nation's coasts. In April 1801 a British fleet entered the strongly fortified harbor of Copenhagen, capturing or destroying the entire (and nominally neutral) Danish fleet. Anti-navalists, seized by the image, claimed with certainty that if the large Danish fleet could be disposed of so easily in a strong harbor, then any tiny American battle squadron built should just be signed over to the British to avoid collateral damage. The final nail in the navalist coffin was provided by the engagement off Cape Trafalgar in 1805: Nelson's victory affirmed a seemingly unchallengeable British naval dominance.²² The Copenhagen mentality had one final impact on the course of the war. Those in political power, as well as some naval officers, believed that American ships should be retained in port and sally in "penny-packets" instead of as a combined squadron, preventing their wholesale destruction while at anchor or at sea.²³ The impact of that thinking will be treated in the following chapters.

Some 165 gunboats (out of over 200 contracts let since 1801) supplemented the larger naval vessels. Flotillas, often with many vessels still in ordinary, deployed at Portsmouth, Boston, Newport, New London, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Norfolk, Wilmington, Charleston, St. Marys, and New Orleans. When checked in their storage sheds on the eve of the war, many of these vessels proved unusable due to neglect

²²*Ibid.*, 108.

²³Hamilton to Commodore John Rodgers, May 21, 1812, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 1:118-119; Rodgers to Hamilton, June 3, 1812, *Ibid.*, 1:119-122; Commodore Stephen Decatur to Hamilton, June 8, 1812, *Ibid.*, 1:122-124; Hamilton to Rodgers, June 22, 1812, *Ibid.*, 1:148-149. The last constituted the undelivered orders that would have steered Rodgers to the penny-packet approach.

and rot (only 62 hulls were in commission at the declaration of war). The best of them were top-heavy and unseaworthy; nonetheless, they often gave excellent results when

Table 2 American Fortifications — June 1812

IDENTIFICATION	LOCATION	NOTES
Fort Sumter	Portland, Maine	Blockhouse
Fort Lilly	Gloucester (Cape Ann), Maine	Unfinished, 3 sides and blockhouse, no guns
Fort Pickering	Salem, Maine	Stone and earth
Fort Sewall	Marblehead, Maine	Stone, blockhouse
Fort Independence	Boston Harbor (Castle Is.)	Modern stone, 5 bastions
Fort Warren	Boston Harbor	
Fort Wolcott	Newport, R.I.	Modern, 5 32-lbers.
Fort Adams	Newport Harbor	Modern, unfinished
Fort Hamilton	Narragansett Bay	1/2 finished, to mount 70 guns
North Battery	Newport Harbor	Unfinished, 8 guns
Dumplings Fort	Narragansett Bay	Tower bastion
Towering Hill	Newport, R.I.	Blockhouse
Fort Trumbull	New London, Conn.	Stone, 14 guns
Fort Joy	Governor's Island, N.Y.	Stone, 13 guns, 51 needed
Batteries	Ellis and Bledsoe Is., N.Y.	13 guns former, 2 in latter
Fort Mifflin	Mud Is., Delaware River	Stone, brick, earth; hvy. guns
Fort Severn	Annapolis, Md.	Battery position
Fort Norfolk	Norfolk, Va.	Earth, 28 unmounted guns
Fort Nelson	Norfolk, Va.	Earth, 14 guns, bad carriages
Forts Johnston, Pickering, Moultrie, and a battery	Charleston, S.C.	All in states of disrepair (or destroyed by hurricanes)

Source: Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Fieldbook of the War of 1812* (New York, 1868), 235-238.

properly deployed.²⁴ Fortresses, gun emplacements, mobile batteries, and floating batteries — all manned by militia — formed the final echelon of Jefferson's scheme for the

²⁴Knox, *USN*, 96; Symonds, *Navalists and Anti-Navalists*, 129-130; Benson J. Lossing, *The Pictorial Fieldbook of the War of 1812* (New York, 1868), 434; Gene A. Smith, *For the Purposes of Defense: The Politics of the Jeffersonian Gunboat Program* (Newark, Del., 1995), 73-93. Spencer Tucker's *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy* is the current defining study of Jefferson's gunboats and their

defense of the American coast.²⁵ Few of these had been completed by 1812, and those finished suffered from various states of disrepair and short staffing (Table 2).

The Royal Navy, with traditions stretching back through the centuries, stood as Britain's bulwark during the Napoleonic Wars.²⁶ Due to the tremendous size of the fleet as well as recruiting, promotion criteria, and the demands of nearly twenty continuous years of war, the quality of ships, officers, and crews varied tremendously (Table 3 lists ship availability numbers and relevant locations at the onset of war).

The Royal Navy officer corps depended on a mix of merit and patronage (also termed "interest"). To become a lieutenant required testing by a board of captains after several years of service, and was open to ratings of sufficient rank as well as midshipmen. The efficiency of the testing often varied, depending on name and patronage, so poorly prepared officers sometimes reached the rank of lieutenant. The next step, master and commander, relied on success in battle or "interest."²⁷ The jump to post captain, where promotion to admiral became a question of merely surviving those more senior on the list, depended exclusively on the Admiralty, though commanders of distant stations could temporarily promote officers to captain to fill vacancies. Success in battle often mattered

employment during the war. Examples of proper deployment, as coastal convoy escorts or supporting larger American vessels, are examined in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

²⁵Symonds, *Navalists and Anti-Navalists*, 420-421.

²⁶William Laird Clowes, *The Royal Navy: A History from the Earliest Times to 1900*, 7 vols. (Reprint of 1897-1903, London, 1997). Volumes 1-5 provide a superb overview of British naval tradition, while volume 6 examines the War of 1812 within the greater context of a world at war.

²⁷Brian Lavery, *Nelson's Navy: The Ships, Men and Organization, 1793-1815* (Annapolis, Md., 1994), 96-97. After Trafalgar, the first lieutenant of every vessel involved was promoted, but for many officers, political patronage was the quick route to promotion.

less than powerful friends at that stage of the naval career. This system promoted men with greatly differing characters and abilities to the ranks of captain and admiral, and a highly variable performance resulted when these men operated independently.

Table 3 Comparative Strengths of the Belligerent Navies — July 1812

Vessels By Rate*	# USN - All Locations	#BR - Americas	#BR - All Other
1st Rate	0	0	7
2nd Rate	0	0	6
3rd Rate	0	3	94
4th Rate	0	1	3
5th Rate	7	15	119
6th Rate	1	8	36
Unrated	<u>8</u>	<u>71</u>	<u>290</u>
Totals:	16	98	607

Sources: ¹William Laird Clowes, *The Royal Navy: A History from the Earliest Times to 1900*, 7 vols. (Reprint of 1897-1903, London, 1997), 6:25, provided the American list, with gunboats and unready hulls removed. *Ships in Sea Pay*, Admiralty Office, 1 July 1812, D, UKLPR, Adm. 8, contained the data for the British forces. All unarmed hulls and vessels in ordinary were removed.

*Ratings: 1st rate - 100+ guns, 2d rate - 90 to 98 guns, 3d rate - 64 to 80 guns, 4th rate - 50 to 60 guns, 5th rate - 30 to 44 guns, 6th rate - 20 to 30 guns, unrated - less than 20 guns. This is a very simplistic summary; see Brian Lavery, *Nelson's Navy: The Ships, Men and Organization, 1793-1815* (Annapolis, Md., 1994), 40-57, for a more detailed presentation of rating (though he does gloss over the impact of the introduction of carronades).

The life of the crew on board a British man-of-war varied from harsh to hellish, depending upon the vessel's officers. By 1812, the majority of crewmen had been pressed, and the remainder had been on board ship for so long (years in many cases) that they had almost forgotten their families and past life.²⁸ Their only solace was the daily rum ration, and that proved far deadlier than combat. Of the estimated 100,000 men lost by

²⁸Clowes, *Royal Navy*, 5:18-31. Clowes chronicles the words of an actual sailor of the period, known by his officers as "Jack Nastyface." The reason for the success of good officers in combat was clearly visible — their crew supported them fully. Unfortunately, Jack found such officers in the minority.

the navy during the Napoleonic era, 50 percent died from disease, 30 percent from alcohol induced accidents, 13 percent from the perils of the sea, while only 7 percent fell to enemy action.²⁹ All factors taken together indicate that Jack Tar was an often unhappy man, thus the infrequent mutiny and the more commonplace desertion. Lord Wellington remarked to the captain of a British sloop-of-war: "Everything goes like clockwork; but, sir, I would not command an army on the same terms you do your ship, for the Crown of England. I have not seen a smile on the face of any individual since I have been on board her."³⁰

Like his officers, Jack loved prize money. By 1812, little enough existed as most enemy shipping had been driven from the seas. An American war offered to change that, returning the navy to the days when riches appeared to officers and admirals in an instant, while many ratings secured enough to build a cozy tavern to support their old age.³¹ The conflict of money and duty, pervading the British hierarchy at far more levels than just prize money, strongly impacted the results of the War of 1812.

One such conflict existed within the support structure of the navy. From the Victualing Board to the Sick and Hurt Board, the system reeked of graft and corruption. Theft, direct and indirect, flourished. The Admiralty had been aware of the problems for years, but attempts to reform the system invariably met with such resistance that continued

²⁹Henderson, *Sloops and Brigs*, 41.

³⁰Forester, *Age of Sail*, 129-130.

³¹Michael A. Lewis, *The Navy in Transition, 1814-1864: A Social History* (London, 1965), 232, and John Loffin, *Jack Tar: The Story of the British Sailor* (London, 1969), 72-73, offer detailed explanations of the prize money system and insights into its impact on the British Navy.

conflict ran contrary to the success of the war effort. Not only were common workmen involved, but peers as well. The latter translated to potentially lost votes on appropriations in Parliament, and that could not be risked.³² As for the commoners, the Admiralty was the largest employer of English citizens in 1812, and enough angry people could have led to general strikes and greatly impaired naval efficiency.

The tiny American naval command structure in no way compared to that of the British Admiralty. A complex interweaving of king, prime minister, Parliament, Council, and the Admiralty Board under the First Lord of the Admiralty, this hierarchy not only monitored almost two dozen diverse boards and functions but handled thousands of decisions each month.³³ Those decisions ranged from strategic directives to the selection of officers for individual vessels. Such diversity and complexity easily bred misdirection and confusion. The Admiralty played a major role in the inefficiency of the blockade of the United States.³⁴

The first impact of any blockade fell upon merchant shipping. On the eve of war, Great Britain mustered 2,500,000 tons, with some 4,500 to 5,000 vessels engaged in

³²Clowes, *Royal Navy*, 5:2-8. Clowes provides a summary of the prevailing corruption, though more detailed information is provided in Leslie Gardiner, *The British Admiralty* (Edinburgh, 1968).

³³Robert Saunders Dundas, 2d Viscount Melville, served as First Lord of the Admiralty, 1812-1827. John W. Croker held the position of First Secretary of the Admiralty during the war, a position that held considerable power, roughly comparable to a combination of senior office manager and executive secretary in today's world. The first Lord of the Admiralty sat on the Council (also termed Privy Council, High Council, Royal Council, or King in Council), the advisory committee to the king. The Council was a decision-making group in its own right, issuing laws termed "orders in council," several of which were central to the causation of war.

³⁴Lavery, *Nelson's Navy*, 21-25, offers the best brief examination available of Admiralty structure and function during the War of 1812.

foreign trade, complemented by numerous coasters and a tremendous fishing fleet. Trade in the opening decades of the 1800s held such strength that numerous port improvement projects developed, such as that on the Isle of Dogs (completed in 1802) capable of serving 600 ships of 300 to 500 tons each and servicing only the West Indies trade.³⁵ United States registries reflected almost 1,200,000 tons of non-fisheries shipping, forming the second largest merchant fleet in the world. An examination of paid duties reveals that over 66 percent of American tonnage traveled to foreign markets in 1811.³⁶

The United States' declaration of war failed to surprise the officers of the Royal Navy. They found it reason to cheer. Americans not only offered the second largest merchant marine in the world on a golden platter, they garnished it with a tiny fleet that, perhaps, would fight well enough to provide glory (and promotion) for a few. Their undefeatable Royal Navy would triumph — because it always triumphed. A civilian journal, *The Statesman*, posted only one week after the announcement of the war in England, offered a different, and as it developed a far more realistic, opinion:

The Americans will be found to be a different sort of enemy by sea than the French. They possess nautical knowledge, with equal enterprise to ourselves. They will be found attempting deeds which a Frenchman would never think of; and they will have all the ports of our enemy open, in which they can make good their retreat with their booty.³⁷

³⁵G. J. Marcus, *The Age of Nelson: The Royal Navy, 1793-1815* (New York, 1971), 423.

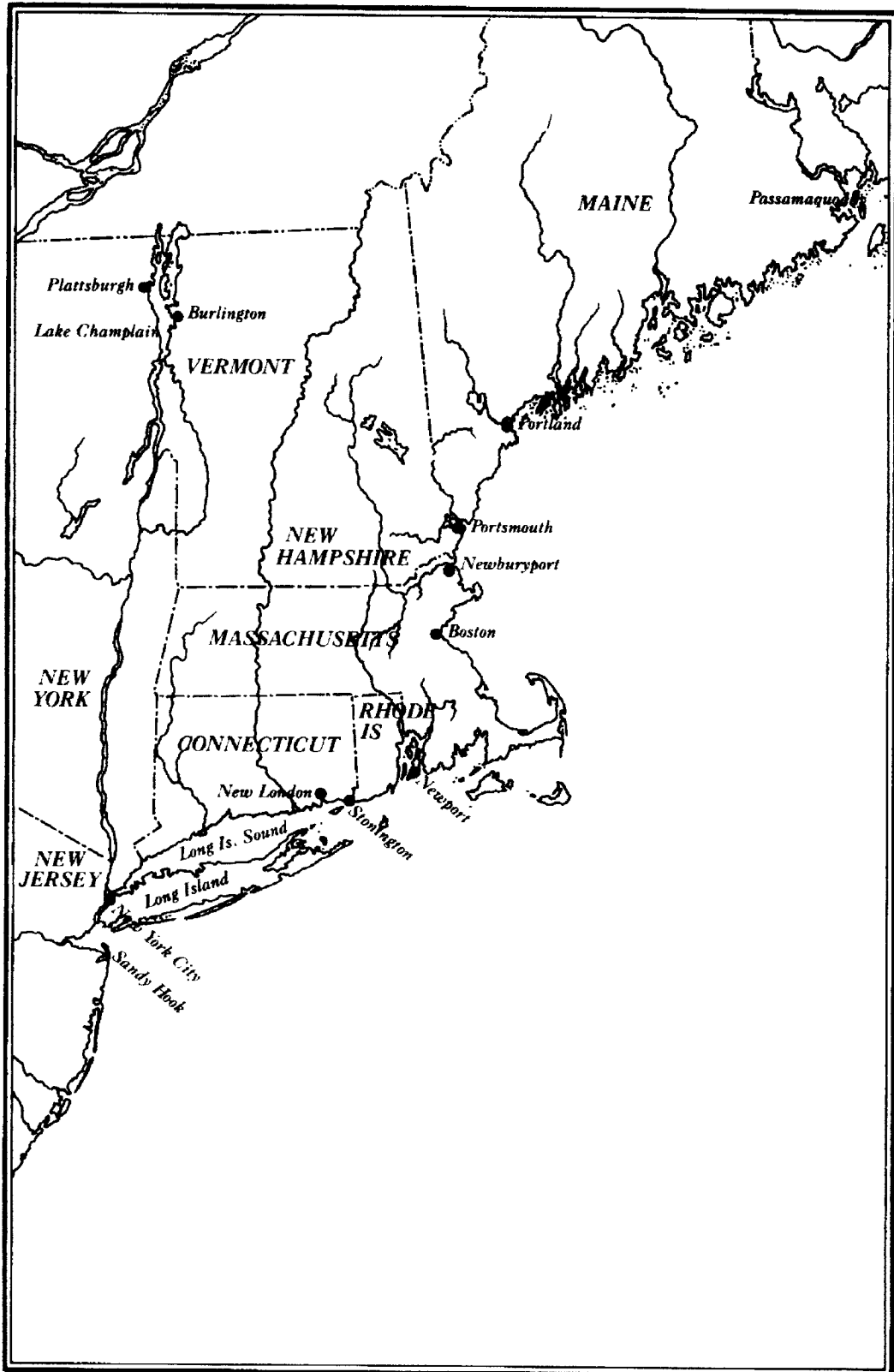
³⁶*American State Papers, Commerce and Navigation* (Washington, D.C., 1832), 1:959, 962. Note that "tonnage" refers to interior dimensions instead of displacement, as appropriate for the period. Also, tonnages are not equivalent across national boundaries, though the difference in this case is small.

³⁷As quoted in Marcus, *Age of Nelson*, 460-461.

The war against the United States would, indeed, prove different from the struggle against France, and the character of the American public and private navies would be only one contributor to the reduced efficiency of the blockade. It was a classic David and Goliath story, and geography provided the American David with important advantages. Chief among them was a coastline riddled with safe anchorages, sheltered waterways, and friendly minor ports. The concentration of deep water ports in the North, supporting bases for the larger vessels of the U.S. Navy, forced the British to concentrate their limited blockading forces there, leaving Southern ports open to light naval raiders and privateers. Finally, even in the heaviest of blockades, winter storms offered snow to blind the blockaders and favorable winds to hurry the Americans to sea.

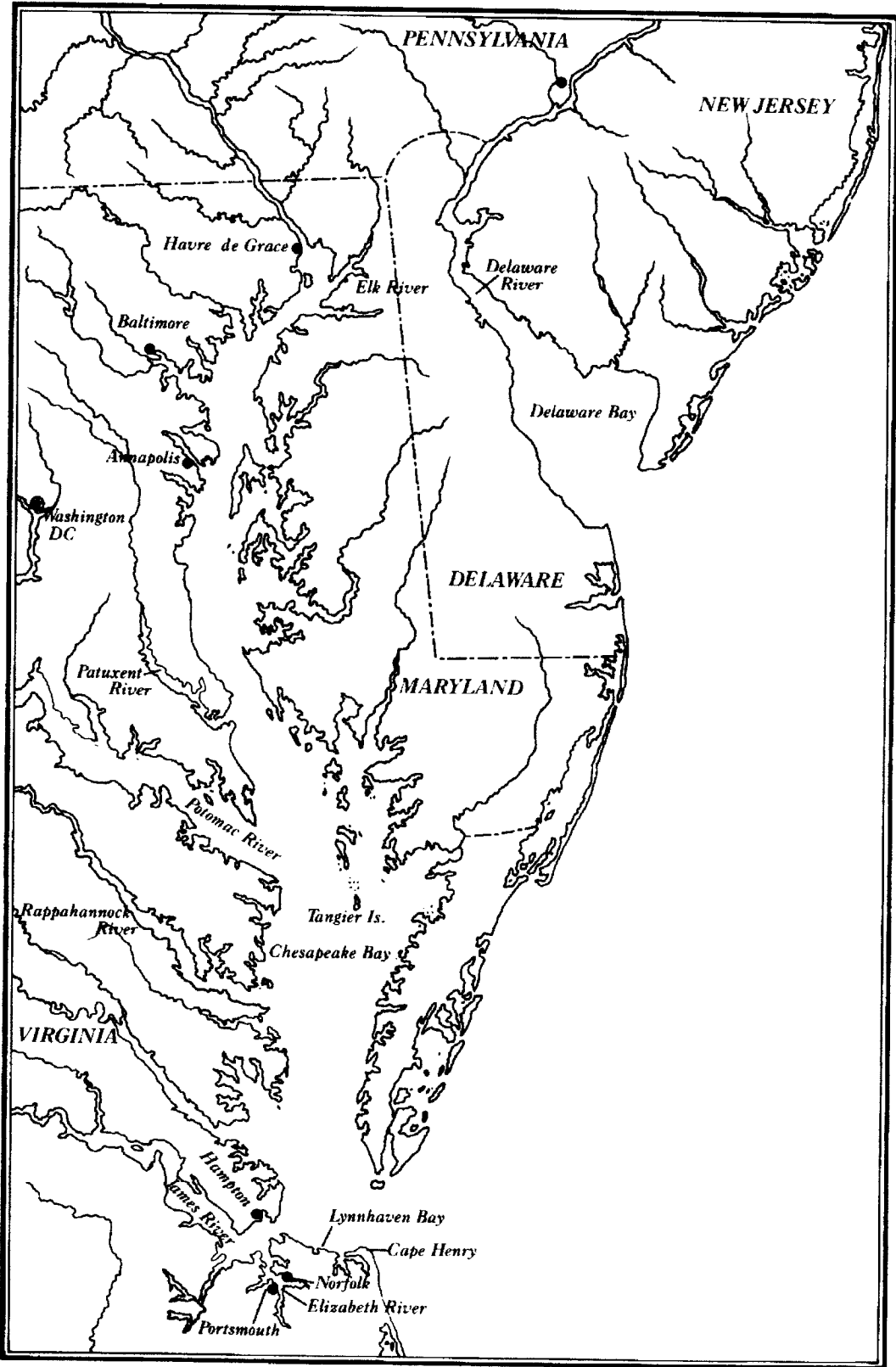
As for the British navy, Goliath had its weaknesses. The large quantity of vessels mattered little if sufficient numbers could not be concentrated against the United States, while the impressive ships of the line could not capture what they lacked the speed to catch. Invariably, British ships were undermanned when they faced their American enemies, giving away a tremendous edge in battle. Neither the long sick lists, sometimes lengthened by the poor quality food provided by the corrupt Victualing Board, nor the tendency of the British sailor to desert his often less than happy ship helped matters. Lastly, one of the most important measures of the effectiveness of the blockade would be the degree to which the Royal Navy could protect its sprawling merchant marine.

Map 1 The Northern Theater



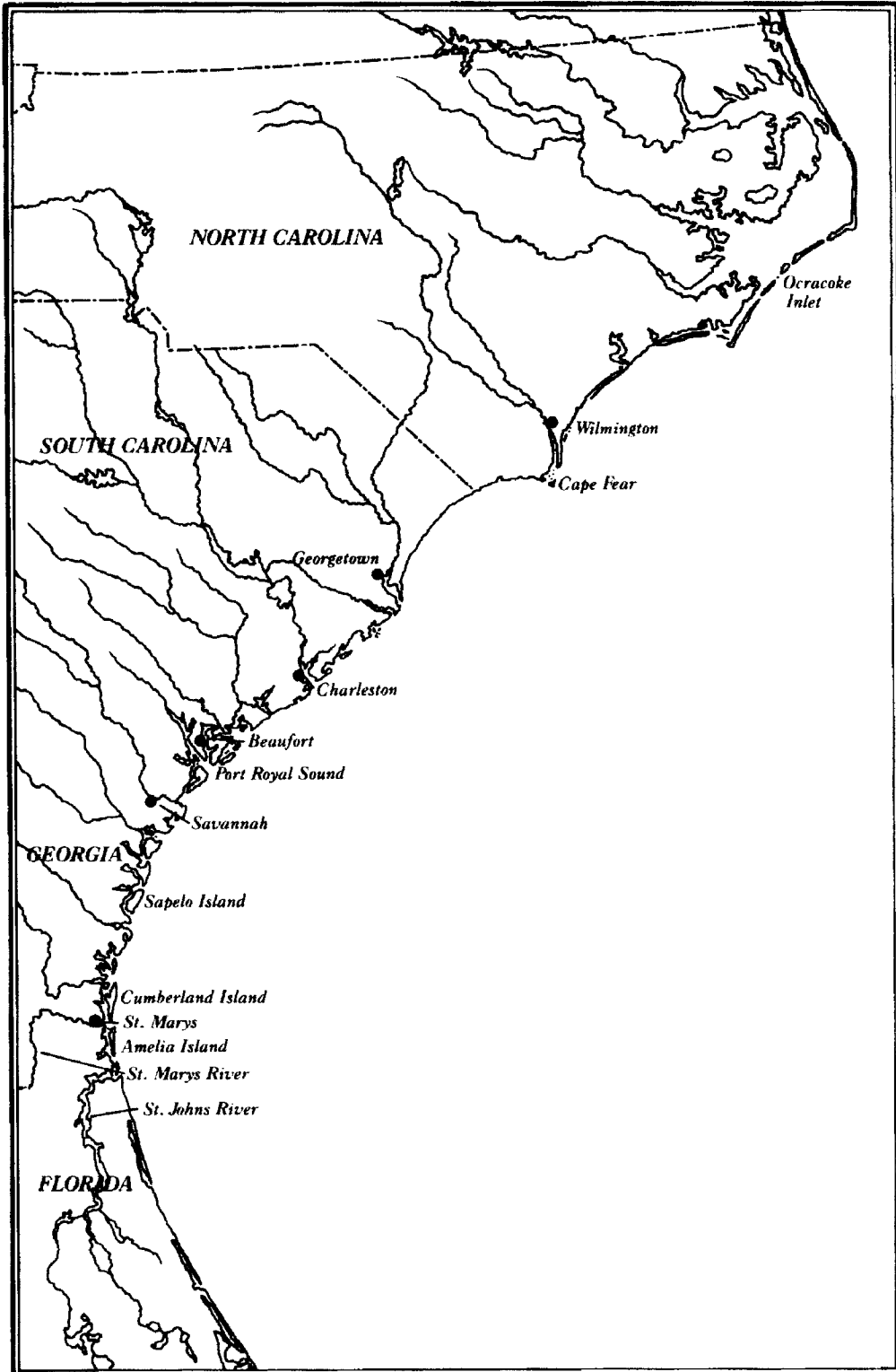
Source: Tucker, *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy*, 113

Map 2 The Mid-Atlantic Theater



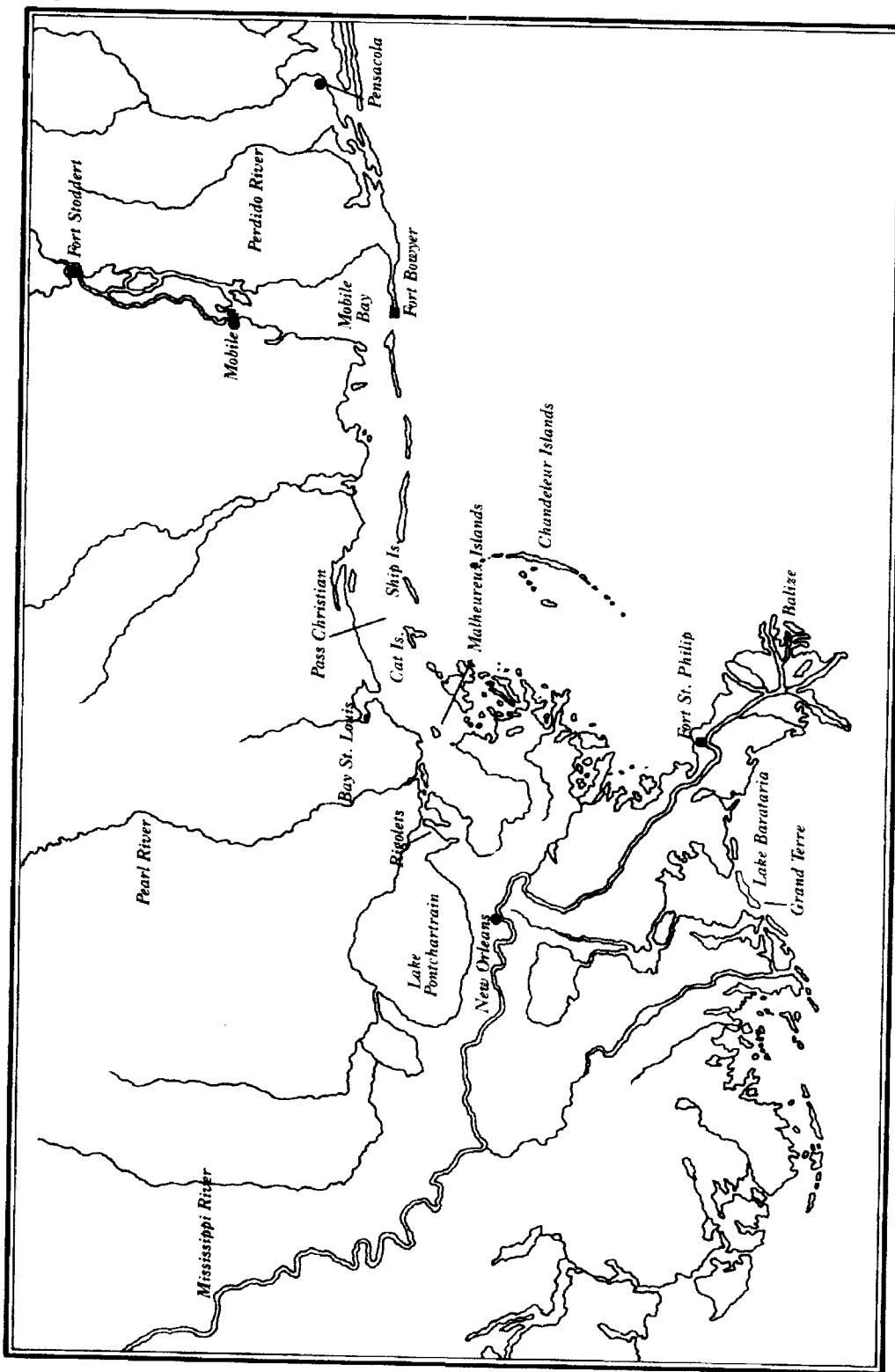
Source: Tucker, The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy, 170

Map 3 The Southern Theater



Source: Tucker, *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy*, 139

Map 4 The Gulf Theater



Source: Tucker, The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy, 156

Chapter II

The Blockade: Theory and Practice

By 1812 the Royal Navy had refined the concept of blockading until it was almost an art. In fact, some form of blockade had been constantly in use against the French since 1793. As with any endeavor involving thousands of men and hundreds of machines, blockades were complex, and the reasoning behind them sometimes obscure, even to those involved.¹ This chapter attempts to simplify the complexity inherent to blockading theory and practice. At the same time, it addresses two additional complex issues — the changing objectives of the British blockade of the United States and the chronology of the blockade's development.

The purest form of blockade, that initially instituted by Britain against France, and later, against the United States, was the *military blockade*.² A military blockade served three purposes: contain the enemy navy, contain enemy privateers, and seize enemy-flagged merchant shipping. The Admiralty experimented with two forms of military blockade against France — *open blockade* and *close blockade*.

In the open blockade, the major elements of the Royal Navy waited in English ports while light units observed French harbors, rushing to call the main fleet to battle when the enemy sailed. This method avoided the constant wear and tear on vessels and

¹John Leyland, ed., *Dispatches and Letters Relating to the Blockade of Brest, 1803-1805*, 2 vols. (London, 1899-1902); Oliver Warner, *The Life and Letters of Vice-Admiral Lord Collingwood* (London, 1968); Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond, *Statesmen and Sea Power* (Oxford, 1946), 170-257. These volumes are among the best sources of information on the theory and implementation of the British system of blockade. Leyland's documentary collection, offering both French and British documents, is particularly interesting in comparison with Dudley's collection from the War of 1812.

²The term "military blockade" is not in common usage. I use it to distinguish primary function.

crews while fighting the often violent Channel weather. Unfortunately, response time was too slow to allow engagement of escaping French squadrons and individual raiders, while idle sailors in harbor threatened such trouble as that occurring at Spithead and the Nore. By the second segment of the war against France, beginning in 1803, the Admiralty had embraced the concept of close blockade exclusively.

In simple form, close blockade meant stationing major British fleet elements within sight of the enemy's ports, so that interception of French vessels could occur before they escaped to sea. This simple form rapidly developed into an echeloned defensive system due to the dangers of inshore work precipitated by inclement weather and currents. The first element of this system consisted of light vessels operating as close as feasible to the mouth of the enemy harbor. Their mission was to gather intelligence, visually and from such sources as local fishermen; to intercept weaker forces attempting to enter or exit the harbor; and to alert the next echelon of vessels, the inshore squadron, if major enemy fleet elements attempted a sortie. These vessels were at greatest risk of loss if the weather situation deteriorated, incorrectly marked charts existed, or the French managed a surprise sortie aimed at eliminating the watchers. The inshore squadron patrolled within signaling distance of the first echelon. It supported the light vessels (which were nominally under the command of the inshore squadron) and was composed of warships capable of standing in a line of battle against a strong French squadron. The inshore squadron often operated close to the French coast, and had to retreat to sea or risk wrecking when threatened with inclement weather. Finally, the third echelon of the blockade was composed of the main

British squadron (or fleet, in the case of Brest), sailing safely out to sea, not always in direct communication with the inshore squadron, but never far away. In the event of severe weather, the Admiralty set a rendezvous for each blockading squadron, so that reforming could be accomplished rapidly, leaving the French port unblockaded for as short a time as possible.

The Royal Navy used this echeloned blockade at major enemy naval bases, notably Brest, Toulon, and Cadiz. The simple military blockade, and sometimes only one or two patrolling vessels, served for secondary ports, such as Ostend, Calais, and Ferrol, which lacked a concentration of enemy naval strength. In 1812, the Admiralty first turned to the simple military blockade for the United States. American naval strength was too weak to justify an echeloned blockade.

The Admiralty never envisioned a perfect military blockade — between weather, accidents of command, and just plain bad luck some enemy vessels always avoided the interdicting warships. Because of this, the blockade was only the first part of a three-tiered defensive system.³ The second level consisted of aggressive pursuit of escaped enemy squadrons and patrol of major shipping lanes. Blockading forces seldom pursued individual enemy naval vessels and privateers, relying on the patrols or the final segment of the system to handle them. That final segment consisted of strongly escorted convoys. Great Britain maintained a convoy system throughout the Napoleonic Wars, and intensified it considerably in 1812 when the Americans entered the struggle. By the end of

³Richmond, *Statesmen and Sea Power*, 338-343.

the Anglo-American conflict in 1815, British ships could not be insured on any of the world's major sea-lanes unless sailing in convoy. Even then, the Admiralty realized that vessels would be lost, and gambled that the gigantic British merchant marine would accept minor losses as a cost of doing business — not that merchants had a realistic option to do otherwise.

Strategically, the military blockade was a defensive measure primarily designed to protect the British merchant marine from the depredations of enemy naval and private warships. In the case of France, a secondary defensive purpose was to guard against the invasion of British territory. Within those greater defensive goals, offensive undertones existed. Blockaders preyed on enemy merchant shipping and destroyed or constricted coasting traffic. Simply interdicting the enemy navy limited its military options, giving the Royal Navy the opportunity for offensive action in areas no longer protected by that blockaded navy. Finally, the blockade served as a springboard for numerous minor offensive actions around, and sometimes within, blockaded ports — cutting out expeditions and raids.

Though the military blockade was the most common blockade used by the British in the Napoleonic era, a second type rose to prominence after 1805. The *commercial blockade*, or *economic blockade*, as instituted by Great Britain, was an offensive ploy aimed only at disrupting the enemy's economy. A military blockade allowed neutral trade to continue through enemy ports as long as it did not transport contraband — goods that benefited the enemy militarily, property owned by the enemy, or goods produced by the

enemy.⁴ A commercial blockade halted neutral shipping into an opponent's harbors, ideally isolating the enemy's economy from the outside world, and ending any chance of supplying its colonies using neutral shipping. The ideal state often proved impossible to reach because of international land borders and, more importantly, because of Great Britain's own pressing economic needs. In 1810, for example, Napoleon actually sold grain to a famine-stricken England, while American vessels transported American grain and provisions to Wellington's army in Spain, the British possessions in the Caribbean, and the Canadian Maritime provinces. In both cases a licensing system allowed the Admiralty to track the process and, it hoped, prevent abuse.

The actual mechanics of blockading seem simple — sail back and forth in front of the port, seizing all legal prey in sight. Consideration of logistics makes the situation much more complex. A ship could stay at sea for two to three months without needing to replenish food and water. Even with local watering, and provisions shipped as deck cargo on board returning vessels, that time at sea could be extended for an additional two to three months at best before general wear and tear, especially to spars and canvas, forced a return to port. The reality was that as much as a third of any blockading fleet would be in port or in transit to port at any given time. In other words, a blockading fleet of twelve ships some four weeks sail from their logistics base would have only eight vessels on

⁴Hugo Grotius, *The Law of War and Peace*, trans. by Francis W. Kelsey (Reprint of 1646, Indianapolis, 1925); Emmerich de Vattel, *The Law of Nations or the Principles of Natural Law*, trans. by Charles G. Fenwick (Reprint of 1758, New York, 1964), should be consulted for accepted international legalities before 1793.

station at any one time, and several of those would be operating at less than full efficiency.⁵

Blockading was a thankless and tiring business. For weeks ships sailed back and forth over the same stretch of sea, boredom relieved only by bad weather and new ships joining the squadron as old ships returned to port. Smaller vessels ranged closer to shore, seeking information about the enemy within their harbors or interdicting coastal trade. Somewhat relieving boredom was the knowledge that a shift in the wind threatened a lee shore, while a tiny slip of attention placed the vessel in range of French 32-pounders. Officers suffered almost as badly as the men; boredom, as well as watching hopes of promotion disappear, was debilitating. Sir Edward Codrington, on the Brest blockade shortly after Trafalgar, wrote to his brother:

It is not fighting, my dear William, which is the severest part of our life, it is having to contend with the sudden changes of seasons, the war of elements, the dangers of a lee shore, and so forth, which produce no food for honor or glory beyond the internal satisfaction of doing a duty we know to be most important, although passed by others unknown and unnoticed.⁶

Another consideration — and a critical one in 1812 — is the impact of years of blockade duty on the efficiency of the Royal Navy. Seamanship remained excellent, as did the often unmentioned skill of damage control — making rapid repairs and providing jury-rigs in the wake of storm induced damage. Gunnery, however, suffered. Between the

⁵Brian Lavery, *Nelson's Navy: The Ships, Men and Organization, 1793-1815* (Annapolis, Md., 1994), 300-305. Lavery provides a concise account of blockading.

⁶Captain Edward Codrington, R.N., to William Codrington, 1805, in G.J. Marcus, *The Age of Nelson: The Royal Navy 1793-1815* (New York, 1971), 427.

lack of targets and a strict Admiralty control of gunpowder wastage, including virtually eliminating practice firing, efficiency dropped drastically — by an estimated 33 percent. Also, ships on blockade, continually under the eye of admirals with their impact on promotion, tended toward “spit and polish,” an effect ruined by even dry firing guns. With the reduction of gunnery drill, potential disaster loomed on the horizon.⁷

The next three chapters chronicle the actual events that surrounded the blockade in the War of 1812. Those events form the usual maelstrom of data interwoven with analysis, and two important sub-chronologies tend to disappear.

The first chronology concerns British strategic objectives during the conflict. Initially, Great Britain sought to secure a quick peace based on its repeal of the orders in council. By December 1812 such a result looked doubtful, and the early American frigate victories aroused a strong feeling of resentment in naval-oriented England. Thus, 1813 found Great Britain ready to fight — but lacking the resources in North America to do so effectively. The major objective became the tightening of the blockade, and an essentially defensive action in the Great Lakes Theater. By 1814, the British government had adopted a hard-line stance against the United States. The impending collapse of Napoleon’s empire freed Wellington’s veterans and Royal Navy vessels for service in North America. With those assets, British planners envisioned a successful drive into the United States from Canada via the Great Lakes, the seizure of New Orleans by land and

⁷C. S. Forester, *The Age of Fighting Sail* (Sandwich, Mass., 1956), 140.

fleet elements, and a strong blockade serving as a springboard for punishing raids along the Atlantic seaboard.

The United States, isolated, disillusioned, and — perhaps most importantly — physically beaten on land and sea, would then have been the recipient of a dictated peace favorable to Britain. Such a favorable peace could have taken several courses. Most likely, Great Britain would have levied a large indemnity for damages to its trade. Certainly it would have forced major concessions along the Canadian border, protecting the St. Lawrence River and, possibly, seeking to control the Great Lakes. Fishing rights and the possession of islands along the Maine coast could have been an issue. Finally, the successful invasion of New Orleans might have provided sufficient leverage to force the return of the Louisiana Purchase to Spain. Unfortunately for the British, things did not work out as planned.

The second chronology outlines the evolution of the blockade. Technically, the military blockade went into force with the first shots of the war, and lasted until the final notifications of the peace agreement reached the blockaders. In reality, the blockade developed throughout the war as the Admiralty slowly vectored its warships to the theater. Even at the end of the war, the Royal Navy was unable to patrol long stretches of American coasts, and several ports, such as Wilmington, North Carolina, had not been permanently interdicted. Throughout the war, both the Admiralty and the local command structure considered the New York to Boston area to be the most important target of the

military blockade. Those ports supported the large American frigates, as well as the bulk of the smaller naval raiders.

Great Britain also used a commercial blockade against the United States. Like the military blockade, it was introduced in a piecemeal fashion, though not entirely for the same reasons. The availability of warships certainly played a part in the process, but the somewhat special status of New England and Amelia Island, and the need for American grain to feed the British army struggling in the Iberian Peninsula contributed equally to the uneven implementation of the economic blockade. The first segment of the commercial blockade, that of the Delaware and Chesapeake bays, was ordered on November 27, 1812. It was reported implemented on February 21, 1813. The Admiralty ordered the next expansion, extending the economic interdiction from Long Island through New Orleans, on March 25, 1813. The order had been received and distributed to the North American command by May 26, but it remained a paper blockade (without warships backing it) along the coasts south of the Virginia Capes through most of the war. Admiral John Borlase Warren extended the commercial blockade to cover the northern approaches to Long Island Sound on November 20, 1813.⁸ The New England coasts remained free of economic restriction until Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane placed it under commercial blockade on April 25, 1814. In other words, the commercial blockade did not completely encompass American coasts until that last date, and even then it remained a paper blockade along stretches of the southern seaboard.

⁸Admiral Warren and Vice Admiral Cochrane will be formally introduced to the reader in Chapters 3 and 5, respectively.

Clearly, the Admiralty understood the power of the blockade, its capabilities, and its weaknesses. It was the primary strategic tool used against the United States. Success offered much, and blockading theory identifies several potential measures of the degree of success attained by British efforts. Seven principles can be isolated for evaluation:

1. The military blockade, as part of a three-tiered defensive system, holds friendly merchant marine losses to *guerre de course* to an acceptable level. Methods of measure include comparative losses, varying insurance rates, economic dislocation, and public outrage.
2. The greater the duration of the military blockade, the less effective the enemy navy becomes as losses experienced by raiders, inability to gain the sea, and the debilitating effects of prolonged, forced stays in port weaken it. This is best measured by the number of enemy vessels at sea across the duration of the blockade, and by the performance of those vessels when in action.
3. The ability of the enemy navy to interfere with the tactical options of the military blockade is impaired or eliminated. The ability of the blockading forces to conduct successful raids, and the impact of those raids on the enemy, measures degree of success.
4. The enemy's coasting trade is virtually eliminated or severely retarded by the military blockade. Measures include percent of normal trade occurring, reduction of enemy tonnage, diversion of potential cargoes to land transport, and public outrage.
5. The enemy merchant marine is held in port or destroyed by the military blockade. Measures are percent of normal exports, tonnage lost, varying insurance rates, and public outrage.
6. A successful commercial blockade stops all neutral trade with the enemy. Measures of success include the elimination of imports and exports carried in neutral hulls.
7. Successful military and economic blockades cause visible dislocation to an enemy's economic, political, and even social infrastructures. This will be readily apparent at the end of the conflict, and the degree of blockade efficiency can be roughly measured by societal change and the length of time the enemy nation takes to recover from its maritime losses.

Theory, experience, assets, and numerous historians seem to dictate that Great Britain's blockade of the United States was an overwhelming success. The principles identified above will be used in Chapter 6 to test that hypothesis.

Chapter III

1812

Too Little, Too Late — The Birth of the Blockade

The beginning of war found Great Britain woefully unprepared for hostilities. Tactical initiative firmly in hand, the U.S. Navy forced the British to delay a military blockade while responding to the American opening moves. This allowed the majority of the United States' merchant marine to return to safe ports for the duration of the war. As British naval strength shifted from Europe, however, the American navy found its operations restricted as its ports came under military blockade. Though the British missed the opportunity to cripple the American merchant marine, by December the Royal Navy had established a tentative military blockade of key enemy ports.

On April 3, 1812, Congress placed the coast of the United States under embargo. Unlike its Jeffersonian predecessor, an offensive measure aimed at Great Britain, this embargo was defensive in nature. Madison intended to remove the merchant marine from a potential war zone, preserving it for use after the conclusion of a short, victorious war against Great Britain.¹

Preceding even that measure, the Admiralty had warned the North American (based at Halifax, Nova Scotia) and Newfoundland stations to be on the alert. A May 9 missive followed awareness of the embargo, and ordered captains "to attack, take or sink, burn or destroy, all ships or vessels belonging to the United States or to the citizens there

¹George Coggeshall, *History of the American Privateers and Letters of Marque During Our War with Great Britain in the Years 1812, 13, and 14* (New York, 1856), 5.

of" in the event of war. Nevertheless, hope for peace forced the Admiralty to include a warning to avoid action or incitement until an actual declaration of war occurred.² In response, Vice Admiral Herbert Sawyer at Halifax concentrated his frigates and waited.

The United States declared war on Great Britain on June 18. Congress immediately ordered pilot boats dispatched to Europe to warn American merchantmen to take shelter in neutral ports for the duration of the war.³ On June 21, Commodore John Rodgers in the *President*, 44, sallied from New York in search of a homeward bound West Indies convoy. His squadron included the frigates *United States*, 44, and *Congress*, 38, sloop *Hornet*, 18, and brig *Argus*, 16. Rodgers sailed without formal orders, though his plan to sail as a squadron had been communicated to Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton in a letter written June 3. Hamilton's undelivered orders, dated June 22, agreed with the squadron principle, but limited the operational distances to near the coast.⁴ On June 23, the squadron gave chase to the frigate *Belvidera*, 36. Despite light damage, the *Belvidera* escaped, giving Sawyer his first warning of war upon its return to Halifax on June 27. Sawyer immediately dispatched a vessel under a flag of truce to New York to verify the declaration of war, losing several valuable days in which interception and defeat

²Admiralty to Commanders of Newfoundland, Halifax, Jamaica, and Leeward Islands Stations, May 9, 1812, in Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Sea Power In Its Relations To The War Of 1812*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1905), 1:385-386; Gerald S. Graham, *Empire of the North Atlantic: The Maritime Struggle for North America* (Toronto, 1950), 247.

³Mahan, *Sea Power*, 1:400. Mahan quoted the *Niles Weekly Register* as reporting that some 30-40 ships reached neutral ports. Tonnages reported in *American State Papers, Commerce and Navigation* (Washington, D.C., 1832), support the idea that they actually continued a coasting trade during the war, based out of Baltic ports.

⁴Dudley W. Knox, *A History of the United States Navy* (New York, 1936), 83; Mahan, *Sea Power*, 1:322.

of Rodgers might well have been possible.⁵ Sawyer's action did not reflect timidity; rather, it arose from years of dealing with an Admiralty much quicker to place blame than to provide support. Verifying the existence of war proved the least of Sawyer's quandaries.

His responsibilities included providing convoy escorts, patrolling the waters around Halifax, seeking out and destroying enemy cruisers and privateers along over one thousand miles of coastal United States and lower Canada, and capturing American merchantmen. Both logic and naval experience dictated that the best place to accomplish all but the first two missions was off the enemy's ports — natural funnels for merchantmen, privateers, and warships alike. Ship availability lists, however, reflected Sawyer's dilemma. His command contained only one ship of the line, six frigates, and some sixteen unrated vessels.⁶ A portion of these supported convoys, and to commit the remainder piecemeal off American ports risked their destruction by the superior squadron under Rodgers. By sailing at once, Rodgers dictated the tempo of the naval war for 1812. Sawyer could not implement a close blockade; he could only concentrate his forces and react.

Across the Atlantic, separated from the developing theater of war by wind and waves, the Council revoked the hated orders in council that initially had provoked the

⁵Captain Richard Byron, R.N., to Vice Admiral Herbert Sawyer, R.N., June 27, 1812, William S. Dudley, *et al.*, ed., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* (Washington, D.C., 1992), 1:157-160; Knox, *USN*, 83.

⁶Ships in Sea Pay, Admiralty Office, 1 July 1812, UkLPR, Adm. 8. The Caribbean stations as well as Newfoundland possessed responsibilities of their own, and the Admiralty had not yet established a joint local command structure.

United States. The date was June 23, the same day that the *Belvidera* fled toward Halifax, pursued by Rodgers' squadron. The orders, however, were revoked less from any desire to avoid an American imbroglio than to vent rapidly building internal economic pressures.

In June 1812, many mills and factories, especially in the cotton dependent cloth sector, still stood idle as a result of Jefferson's embargo, the Non-Importation Acts, and the War Embargo. Earlier in the year some 40,000 cotton mill workers had struck for higher wages and increased work hours, while the unemployed of London and Manchester alone had doubled between 1810 and 1812. These problems, coupled with personal taxes the like of which England had never known, forced merchants, industrialists, and ship owners to unite, petitioning the crown for removal of what they perceived as the major problem: those orders in council interfering with neutral trade.⁷

Repeal owed more to internal problems than to current negotiations with the United States, but both the Council and the Admiralty seemed fixated on the change as a preventative for the coming war. Despite earlier warnings to the North American squadrons, the Admiralty took no measures to strengthen them, nor did it offer any realistic operational plans to the squadron commanders. It would be slightly over a month after the repeal before the grim notice of war officially arrived in London, far too late for an early blockade. And while the Admiralty waited, Americans continued to sail.

⁷G. J. Marcus, *The Age of Nelson: The Royal Navy, 1793-1815* (New York, 1971), 413; Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (Avon, Great Britain, 1992). Colley presents early modern Britain in a "New History" format, with several sections on economic and civil unrest during the Napoleonic Wars; though the War of 1812 does not even rate a footnote, the book is well worth examining by students of the period for the insights into British society and economics.

The *Essex*, 32, Captain David Porter, sailed from New York on July 3. Unable to sail with Rodgers as originally planned, Porter sailed at a fortuitous time. Only two days later a British squadron under Captain Phillip V. Broke (Sawyer remained in Halifax) appeared off Sandy Hook. Aside from Broke's *Shannon*, 38, it included the *Belvidera*, 36, *Aeolus*, 32, and *Africa*, 64. The only American warship trapped in New York was the unfortunate brig *Nautilus*, 14. The *Guerriere*, 38, joined the British force on July 14. Two days later the *Nautilus* attempted to run by the British squadron, but surrendered after a six hour chase — the first vessel of the U.S. Navy lost in the war.⁸

Unaware of Broke's force cruising off New York, Captain Isaac Hull in the *Constitution*, 44, cleared the Virginia Capes on July 12 after leaving Annapolis on July 5. His orders from the Navy Department, dated June 18, read: "You will use the utmost dispatch to reach New York . . . In your way from thence, you will not fail to notice the british flag, should it present itself . . . but you are not to understand me as impelling you to battle."⁹ On July 16, Hull sighted a sail closing toward his ship off the coast south of New York; topsails of other vessels appeared in the distance. Despite light winds, Hull cleared for battle, determined to close the strange sail, which he did during the night. Dawn revealed the *Constitution* in imminent danger of capture by the entire British squadron. A two day chase across a virtually windless sea followed, with both forces using

⁸Lieutenant William M. Crane to Hamilton, July 29, 1812, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 1:209-211; Knox, *USN*, 84.

⁹Hamilton to Captain Isaac Hull, June 18, 1812, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 1:209-211. The last line hints that Hamilton considered preserving a fleet in being far superior to expending ships in glorious battle — an important concept for the American navy of 1812.

oared boats to tow, and later kedge, their vessels forward until the wind returned. Hull escaped only through superb seamanship, the crew's hard effort, and luck. The *Constitution*, unable to reach New York because of the patrolling squadron, anchored at Boston on July 27.¹⁰ Meanwhile, Broke sailed for Jamaica with his squadron on July 24 to escort a large homeward bound convoy. During the squadron's time off New York, it had captured fourteen merchantmen and one warship, alarmed the local populace with a threat of invasion, and almost came to grips with the *Constitution*.¹¹ All of this in only nineteen days: there exists no better example of what an early blockade stood to accomplish.

Broke joined the convoy on July 29, the same day that the official declaration of the war arrived in London. Unofficial notice, via dispatches from Sawyer, had reached the Admiralty on July 25, but British leaders adopted a "wait and see (and hope this is wrong)" attitude.¹² With war an apparent reality, four important decisions awaited the Council and the Admiralty. First, since the United States was unaware on June 18 that the orders in council had been rescinded, making an immediate overture to restore peace offered hope for a quick settlement of the conflict. Second, a way had to be found to keep American grain flowing to Wellington's army, just then beginning an invasion of Spain, at least until secondary grain sources could be developed. Third, American raiders —

¹⁰Tyrone G. Martin, *A Most Fortunate Ship: A Narrative History of Old Ironsides*, Revised Edition, (Annapolis, Md., 1997), 145-151. Martin's narrative of the chase is excellent, and does not disguise an important observation: Hull's unawareness of Broke's squadron does not speak well for U.S. naval intelligence in 1812.

¹¹Lieutenant Oliver H. Perry to Hamilton, July 26, 1812, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 1:200-201; Knox, USN, 84.

¹²Mahan, *Sea Power*, 1:388.

government and private — would wreak havoc on British shipping lanes unless a plan could be found to contain or destroy them. Finally, in a navy stretched to the breaking point by the blockade of most of continental Europe, where could the needed warships be found for whatever plan was eventually developed?

The first steps taken were economic and occurred almost automatically. The government seized all American vessels in British ports, impounded all American goods on their docks, and declared debts to American merchants null and void (including \$100,000,000 owed by the government for purchases of grain).¹³ The Admiralty also ordered that all merchant vessels sailing to North America proceed only in convoys. Vessels that sailed alone did so without insurance, almost guaranteeing compliance with convoy sailing.¹⁴

The delicate negotiations with the United States required a much more skilled touch than that of Sawyer, who, aside from being too junior and inexperienced in diplomatic work, was due for rotation to another assignment. The Admiralty selected Admiral Sir John Borlase Warren for the role. Warren, a veteran of several sea engagements, the blockade of France, and highly successful anti-coasting efforts, had served as a Council member in 1802, and later as ambassador to Russia. At age 59, he seemed ideally suited to the job at hand, combining military and diplomatic experience.¹⁵

¹³As a result of this action, American merchants demanded specie for their delivery of grain to the Iberian Peninsula under the licensed trade, remaining a severe drain upon Wellington's war-chest.

¹⁴Graham, *Empire*, 247; Mahan, *Sea Power*, 1:381-388.

¹⁵Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, eds., *Dictionary of National Biography* (London, 1885-1901), 20:869-872.

Suitability became a moot point, however, beginning with contradictory orders requiring Warren to “attack, sink, burn or otherwise destroy” the commerce and navy of the United States while urging him to “exercise all possible forbearance” to facilitate negotiating peace.¹⁶ The Admiralty decisions that eventually crushed Warren did not end there.

Lord Wellington wrote from Lisbon to his superior in London on December 17, 1811: “I recommend you to renew your measures in America, so far as to send there bills for 400,000 l. [sic], to be laid out in purchase of corn.”¹⁷ A few months later, war with the United States now a reality, he penned: “All this part of the Peninsula has been long this year on American flour,” and asked that alternative sources — Brazil, Egypt, the Barbary States — be pursued.¹⁸ Supplying the army on the Iberian Peninsula, particularly with Wellington planning to begin a new offensive to drive the French across the Pyrenees, remained a major problem for both the Council and Admiralty through 1814. Nor was that the only supply problem encountered, for American grain and provisions supplied much of the Maritime Provinces and British holdings in the Caribbean. The answer was to extend the successful licensing system used to control trade under the now stricken orders in council. Initially, licenses, providing safe passage for ships possessing them as they

¹⁶Leslie Gardiner, *The British Admiralty* (Edinburgh, 1968), 222.

¹⁷Wellington to Stuart, 17 December 1811, Julian Rathbone, ed., *Wellington's War: His Peninsula Dispatches* (London, 1984), 181.

¹⁸As quoted in C. S. Forester, *The Age of Fighting Sail* (Sandwich, Mass., 1956), 182.

traveled to designated ports with designated cargoes, were issued by the ambassador in Washington. Eventually, they came to be distributed by both diplomats and admirals.¹⁹

As the war opened, several American captains seized ships engaging in licensed trade. On July 6, 1812, Congress passed legislation ordering government officials to seize ships operating under license and assess the owners a penalty of twice the value of vessel and cargo. Additionally, the law labeled the crime a misdemeanor, carrying up to twelve months in prison and a fine of \$1,000.²⁰ Unofficially, Thomas Jefferson best voiced the American stance a few weeks later:

If she [Britain] is to be fed at all events, why may we not have the benefit of it as well as others? . . . Besides, if we could, by starving the English armies, oblige them to withdraw from the peninsula, it would be to send them here; and I think we had better feed them for pay, than feed and fight them here for nothing. To keep the war popular, we must keep open the markets. As long as good prices can be had, the people will support the war cheerfully.²¹

Avarice over integrity, or perhaps, economic logic over military principles, apparently thrust the unofficial dogma to the fore in the early months of the war. The first successful condemnation of a licensed vessel did not occur until December 31, 1813.²²

¹⁹Graham, *Empire*, 247-248, 252; Robert G. Albion and Jennie B. Pope, *Sea Lanes in Wartime: The American Experience, 1775-1942* (New York, 1942), 108-109; Mahan, *Sea Power*, 1:265, 409-412; Charles J. Ingersoll, *History of the Second War Between the United States of America and Great Britain, Declared by Congress the 18th of June, 1812, and Concluded by Peace the 15th of February, 1815* (Philadelphia, 1849), 39-43. Ingersoll stated that the British ambassador, Andrew Allen, ended his stay in the United States by fleeing American authorities attempting to stop the dispensing of licenses. He was less than eager, however, to return to his superiors, who had discovered the kickbacks Allen had accepted to fatten his own purse.

²⁰*Niles Weekly Register*, September 4, 1813.

²¹As quoted in Albion, *Sea Lanes*, 116.

²²Ingersoll, *History*, 40; Michael J. Crawford, "The Navy's Campaign against the Licensed Trade in the War of 1812," *American Neptune*, 66 (Summer 1986), 165-172. The latter is the most useful article written to date on the licensed trade. Crawford's description of the inherent difficulties in simply proving the use of a license, as well as the various ruses used by the U.S. Navy in capturing the culprits, are

As the calendar edged towards 1813, the licensing system served an additional, and sinister, British purpose. In an order dated November 9, 1812, the Council directed the Admiralty: “Whatever importations are proposed to be made under [this] order from the United States of America should be by your licenses, confined to the ports in the Eastern States exclusively.”²³ The term “Eastern States” referred to the section extending from the New York City to the Canadian border. Well aware of the discontent existing in that area (thanks to public voting records, American newspapers, and British government representatives in every port), the new directive blatantly encouraged disunion by creating wealth imbalance and political-economic leverage. Such an assertion could almost seem ridiculous — Britain had a need for the trade without subterfuge and hidden agendas — had not Admiral Warren been directed to make peace with the United States or “*any part thereof*.”²⁴

The third and fourth part of the Admiralty’s dilemma intertwined. A blockade had to be established to contain American cruisers, while additional naval elements were needed for patrol and convoy duties against the few enemy vessels that would inevitably slip through any blockade. Unfortunately, despite its great size, the Royal Navy was stretched thin. Few vessels were available for North America and its eastern approaches, unless the Admiralty stripped convoy escorts in other waters or reassigned ships from the

illuminating. Note that Crawford mentioned court cases being decided as early as summer of 1813, though the only specific case mentioned was that of the *Julia*, whose condemnation was upheld by the Supreme Court on March 7, 1814.

²³Ingersoll, *History*, 39.

²⁴Forester, *Age of Sail*, 79-80; my italics.

French blockade. The Admiralty considered both patently impossible with raiders already at sea and the French fleet still strong within its fortified harbors. Only one option seemed possible: Combine all stations in North America and the Caribbean under Warren's command while reinforcing as ship availability increased. With slightly over one hundred ships in his command, and the trickle of reinforcements, surely Warren could, if peace failed, sustain a close blockade.²⁵ The fallacy of this arrangement is readily apparent. First, most ships in the new operational command had been committed to existing convoy and patrol lanes by June 18, 1812. Not only did war reinforce the continued need for those vessels, it created new lanes of both types. Even with reinforcements, convoy escort took priority, and extra vessels for blockade remained unavailable through the end of 1812. Second, Warren was given ships based as far apart as 1,700 miles. This required weeks of sailing simply to communicate with subordinates, and even then any small dispatch boats were easily captured by privateers and American warships. Such orders resulted in a classic setup for failure. In the Admiralty's defense, however, time and time again since 1793 the Royal Navy achieved so much with so little that the mere thought of impossibility no longer found recognition in Whitehall — particularly in regards to the pathetic Americans. By the second week of August, with plan in hand and Warren dispatched to Halifax, the Admiralty could only await developments. Along the shores of the United States, however, the conflict never slowed.

²⁵Note that several historians misconstrued this action. For example, Albion, *Sea Lanes*, 116, states that Warren arrived at Halifax with 101 ships. Historians also differ on the number of reinforcements to Halifax in 1812. Marcus, *Age of Nelson*, 455, felt they consisted of 3 ships of the line, 21 frigates, and 37 unrated vessels. Later calculations will show that I disagree, by over 50%!

During the month of July, the sloop *Colibri*, 16, and three brigs appeared off the port of Charleston. They patrolled for some weeks, often so close to the bar that American officers suspected local pilots provided assistance to the British. Twelve merchantmen fell into their hands before they returned to Halifax, another example of the potential impact of even a limited blockade.²⁶

On August 2, the *Constitution*, now refitted and resupplied, sailed from Boston seeking Rodgers' squadron. Four days later, Broke left the *Africa* to escort the homeward bound convoy, taking the majority of his ships to New York, where he hoped to meet Rodgers returning to port. Broke decided to detach his vessels one-by-one for resupply. The *Guerriere*, having been at sea the longest, departed for Halifax that same day. Less than two weeks later, on August 19, it struck to the *Constitution*. Hull scuttled the hulk that had been the *Guerriere*, and sailed for port to repair, resupply, and announce his victory, arriving on August 30.²⁷ Commodore Rodgers joined Hull there the following day, having taken only seven prizes during his long cruise. Rodgers' ships were worn, and his crews suffering from scurvy — including several deaths — after less than three months at sea.²⁸

Nor were matters quiet in the southern areas of operation during August. Sailing out of Charleston, finding British patrols now withdrawn, the ex-revenue cutter *Gallatin* captured a British privateer on the sixth. American private naval vessels also frequently

²⁶P. C. Coker III, *Charleston's Maritime Heritage, 1670-1865* (Charleston, S.C., 1987), 156.

²⁷Mahan, *Sea Power*, 1:327-335; Martin, *Fortunate Ship*, 155-165.

²⁸Knox, *USN*, 83; Lossing, *Pictorial Fieldbook*, 436.

based out of Charleston, and several prizes arrived there in August, courtesy of those raiders.²⁹ In the Gulf of Mexico, a devastating hurricane sank, disabled, or grounded the American flotilla at New Orleans. It completely dismasted the British sloop *Brazen*, 18, patrolling off the delta. Only the American force's damage prevented capture of the British vessel, and the jury-masted *Brazen* limped home to Jamaica.³⁰

On September 7, the *Essex* anchored at Chester, Pennsylvania, near the mouth of the Delaware River. Its cruise had netted eight merchantmen and the first British warship to be captured by an American naval vessel, the *Alert*, 16, on August 13.³¹ In Boston, Rodgers received a letter from Hamilton ordering ships to sail in small groups of no more than two frigates and a smaller vessel from this point onward. Since the earlier mission of distracting the British while American merchantmen made safe havens had been accomplished, and possibly because the sailing of his large squadron had accomplished no more in prizes than the efforts of the *Essex*, Rodgers agreed.³² Yet news of Broke's depleted squadron's arrival off New York on September 10 must have tempted Rodgers sorely. Apparently, Broke by-passed Boston on his continuing journey toward Halifax to replenish his squadron, so no confrontation ensued. Rodgers, however, had certainly not lost heart. In a letter to Hamilton in mid-September he communicated his most recent intelligence on British movements, notably the arrival of Warren and several British men-

²⁹Coker, *Heritage*, 156.

³⁰Lieutenant Daniel S. Dexter to Captin John Shaw, August 23, 1812, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 1:403-405; Spencer C. Tucker, *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy* (Columbia, S.C., 1993), 155.

³¹Captain David Porter to Hamilton, September 3, 1812, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 1: 443-447.

³²Hamilton to Rodgers, September 9, 1812, *Ibid.*, 1:470-472.

of-war at Halifax. He went on to write, counter to any philosophy of maintaining a "fleet-in-being," his thoughts on the future of the war:

They are determined, it appears, to have Ships enough on our Coast: comparatively small as our force may be. I hope that we shall still be able however, by judicious management, to annoy them: and indeed if we had half their number, of equal force, I am satisfied they would soon be made heartily sick of our Coast: At any rate, should they send their whole Navy on our Coast, I hope it never will be urged as a reason for the few vessels we have not going to Sea.³³

For Admiral Warren, arriving at Halifax almost two full months after receiving his orders, "Ships enough" definitely roused concern. He relieved Sawyer on September 27, with less than welcome news from all quarters.³⁴ Reports from the Caribbean stations had not arrived, so he was ignorant of their status and could not form a coordinated plan dividing responsibilities among the various commands. Nor could Warren simply deal with the responsibilities of Commander-in-Chief, North America, as he also had to wear Sawyer's former hat, commander of the Halifax squadron, until the Admiralty provided a replacement. Sawyer's command seemed a shambles, with ships in disrepair from long periods at sea and crews far understrength because of desertions and disease.³⁵ He had been unable to destroy the tiny American navy or even confine it to its ports, and Sawyer had only minimally disrupted American shipping. Worse, the western Atlantic swarmed with enemy privateers from the Bay of Fundy to the Caribbean. In the first eight weeks of war they had taken one hundred merchantmen and a single naval vessel, as opposed to the

³³Rodgers to Hamilton, September 17, 1812, *Ibid.*, 1:494-496.

³⁴Mahan, *Sea Power*, 1:391.

³⁵James A. Pack, *The Man Who Burned the White House: Admiral Sir George Cockburn, 1772-1853* (Annapolis, Md., 1987), 143.

American navy's record of eight merchantmen, and the British captures of one naval vessel, thirteen small privateers, and forty merchantmen.³⁶ Yet all of those concerns remained secondary to the attempt to negotiate peace. On September 30, Warren dispatched a missive to Madison offering peace based on the removal of the orders in council. The proposal called for an immediate return to normality as it existed before the declaration of war, with reparations and any indemnities to be determined later by commissioners.³⁷ Only after this did he begin to place his command in order.

On October 8, Rodgers with the *President* and *Congress* and Decatur with the *United States* and the brig *Argus* sailed jointly from Boston. Three days later they separated, in accord with Hamilton's orders. The *Essex* had been designated to take the place of the *Argus*, but was unable to sail from Chester until October 28.³⁸ The sloop *Wasp*, 18, passed the Capes of the Delaware on October 13, enroute to Atlantic raiding. After meeting with heavy weather, it engaged the brig *Frolic*, 18, guarding a British convoy. Emerging the victor, celebration was short-lived: the *Poictiers*, 74, took both damaged vessels that same day.³⁹

In England, patience had shortened by mid-October. Merchants were losing ships daily, the news of the loss of the *Guerriere* had arrived, and Warren had not yet updated the Admiralty on the status of the peace proposal. Though not without hope for peace,

³⁶Edgar S. Maclay, *A History of American Privateers* (New York, 1899), 241.

³⁷Mahan, *Sea Power*, 1:391.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 2:2.

³⁹William Laird Clowes, *The Royal Navy: A History from the Earliest Times to 1900*, 7 vols. (Reprint of 1897-1903, London, 1997), 6:38-41.

the Council, under immediate pressure, issued an order specifying “general reprisals against the United States” on October 13. With restrictions removed, British officers no longer had to worry about the negative impact of their actions on British-American diplomacy.⁴⁰

Though no blockade existed in October, patrols sometimes appeared, as in the case of Charleston from October 14 to 31. Three British brigs captured nine merchantmen over two weeks’ time. Captain Charles H. Dent, commanding the Charleston naval station, responded by purchasing small vessels for local defense. Dent’s concern was the “inability” of the U.S. Navy to free the southern coasts of enemy warships.⁴¹ In truth, the government’s decision to use the navy in a *guerre de course* reflected not naval inability, but a conscious choice to concentrate on damaging the enemy’s economy rather than protecting its own coasts, though the latter benefited indirectly from each convoy escort strengthened or cruiser assigned to sea-lane patrol.

On October 25, the *United States* captured the *Macedonian*, 38, in a brief action.⁴² A day later, Bainbridge led the *Constitution* and *Hornet* to sea from Boston.⁴³ In a month with little good news for Admiral Warren, both events proved unpleasant in the extreme, but a letter received from American Secretary of State James Monroe on October 27

⁴⁰Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:9.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 2:15; Captain Charles H. Dent to Hamilton, October 17, 1812, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 1:534-535; Lieutenant Charles F. Grandison to Hamilton, December 20, 1812, *Ibid.*, 1:610-611.

⁴²Clowes, *Royal Navy*, 6:41-47; James Tertius de Kay, *Chronicles of the Frigate Macedonian, 1809-1922* (New York, 1995), 45-99.

⁴³Knox, *USN*, 89.

provided the worst news of all: there would be no peace without an end to Great Britain's impressment policies.⁴⁴ Britain would not, could not, surrender impressment. The final days of October marked the end of the "Phony War" of 1812; the clock would not turn back.

November found little action along the northern coast of the United States. Though Warren had received substantial reinforcements in the form of three ships of the line, ten frigates, and four sloops, most needed immediate repair due to storm damage. As welcome as the ships, Rear Admiral Sir George Cockburn arrived as second-in-command.⁴⁵ Cockburn's reputation as a fire-eater and cutting-out specialist proved to be deserved.

In the South, vessel purchases in Charleston continued with the schooner *Leila Ann*, renamed *Ferret* and placed in operation at Beaufort. The navy also bought the schooner *Carolina* for use in Charleston.⁴⁶ The first naval ship loss in the southern theater occurred on November 22, when the brig *Viper*, 20, on its third fruitless cruise for prizes, fell victim to Captain James Yeo in the frigate *Southampton*, 32. The British enjoyed their prize for only five days. Enroute to Jamaica, both vessels wrecked on an uncharted reef.⁴⁷

By the end of November both the Council and the Admiralty knew that there could be no peaceful resolution to the war. On November 27, the Council issued an order

⁴⁴Graham, *Empire*, 238.

⁴⁵Pack, *Cockburn*, 145.

⁴⁶Coker, *Heritage*, 157-160.

⁴⁷Captain James L. Yeo, R.N., to Vice Admiral Charles Stirling, R.N., November 22, 1812, and December 11, 1812, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 1:594-595.

directing Warren to implement immediately a “rigorous commercial blockade” of the Delaware and Chesapeake bays. These orders excluded even licensed ships from entering the named waters. One day earlier, the Admiralty had dispatched messages to European neutrals warning of the impending blockade. Warren, plagued with communication delays and the onset of winter had too few vessels to begin the blockade any earlier than February 1813.⁴⁸

December began on a positive note for Americans as the *United States* returned home with its prize, the British 38-gun frigate *Macedonian*. On December 17, Captain Evans’ *Chesapeake* sailed from Boston, intent on finding prizes.⁴⁹ Twelve days later the *Constitution* bagged the real prize, capturing and scuttling the British frigate *Java*, 38. This proved to be the last American frigate-to-frigate victory of the war.⁵⁰ The final American ships to return from cruises during the year — *President*, *Congress*, and *Argus* — had captured only a dozen vessels during their weeks at sea. Rodgers was bitter, as only an officer who does everything correctly but finds the enemy stolen away can be bitter. Though he had earned the rank of captain and the title of commodore, Rodgers was never a lucky sailor.⁵¹

The various legislative and command hierarchies were as busy as their ships during December. The Admiralty renewed its blockade warning to neutrals and dispatched

⁴⁸Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:9; Forester, *Age of Sail*, 134.

⁴⁹Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:13.

⁵⁰Martin, *Fortunate Ship*, 171-179; Knox, *USN*, 95.

⁵¹Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:11.

another message to Warren, making him aware that no one less than the Prince Regent desired the blockade enforced immediately.⁵² On the other side of the Atlantic, Congress voted a major increase in naval appropriations on December 23. The \$3,500,000 expenditure for four ships of the line, six frigates, and six sloops occurred far too late for the war effort. Though some of the sloops would see action, the ships of the line sailed only after the war's end.⁵³ Finally, reputed alcoholic Paul Hamilton resigned his post as secretary of the navy on the last day of the year. William Jones, appointed in his place, reaped the benefits of the early successes of the U.S. Navy, but soon faced the whirlwind those successes had sown: blockade.⁵⁴

The U.S. Navy accomplished its primary mission for 1812 in grand style. The majority of the American merchant marine made home ports — 250 ships returned to Boston alone, with similar numbers arriving safely in New York and Baltimore.⁵⁵ By sailing in squadron, the navy had forced the British to concentrate their forces instead of stationing individual ships off American ports. Along the way, it captured six vessels of the Royal Navy, three of them frigates, while surrendering only two brigs and a sloop.⁵⁶ In

⁵²Admiralty to Admiral Sir John B. Warren, R.N., December 26, 1812, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 1:633-634.

⁵³Craig Symonds, *Navalists and Anti-Navalists: The Naval Policy Debate in the United States, 1785-1827* (Newark, Del., 1980), 184.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 185.

⁵⁵Marcus, *Age of Nelson*, 467; George Coggeshall, *History of the American Privateers and Letter-of-Marque, During Our War With England In The Years 1812, 1813, and 1814* (New York, 1856), 81, listed 266 vessels for New York.

⁵⁶W. P. Gossett, *The Lost Ships of the Royal Navy, 1793-1900* (London, 1986), 84-87.

regards to seizure of enemy merchantmen, the navy proved less successful, capturing only twenty-eight vessels.⁵⁷ Fortunately, Mr. Madison's private navy took up the slack.

Around three hundred privateers sailed from American ports during 1812.⁵⁸ Most were true privateers, hoping to seize enemy shipping for profit, instead of letter of marque traders, seeking to move goods first and capture enemies only if a golden opportunity existed. Their total number of captures the first year of war remains uncertain, though slightly over three hundred is a conservative estimate.⁵⁹ Higher estimates tend towards five hundred vessels.

Unfortunately, naval operations constituted the minor portion of the American plan for a short, victorious war. The seizure of Canada, whether as a bargaining chip or as an extension of the American union, formed the hub of all strategic planning (such as it was). On August 6, 1812, the first prong of a three-tined attack not only failed, but resulted in debacle. General William Hull surrendered his entire army and the town of Detroit to the British. The two forces remaining did not achieve success, though they did not lose significant ground.⁶⁰ Failures on land revealed the absolute necessity of controlling the Great Lakes, and naval officers, ratings, building materials, ordnance, and munitions soon

⁵⁷George F. Emmons, *Navy of the United States from the Commencement, in 1775, through 1853* (Washington, D.C., 1853), 56-74.

⁵⁸Graham, *Empire*, 236. Graham gives 318 as the number of privateers. That was the number of letters of marque issued in 1812, though how many actually made it to sea and how many times they actually sortied is debatable.

⁵⁹Contemporary sources, much less the historians cited in this study, do not agree on captures. These estimates were taken from the *Niles Weekly Register*, 1812 editions.

⁶⁰David G. Chandler, *Atlas of Military Strategy: The Art, Theory and Practice of War, 1618-1878* (London, 1980), 116-117.

began to flow in that direction.⁶¹ This resulted in shortages of those same resources along the Atlantic coast. Shortfalls continued throughout the war, which proved to be neither short nor victorious.

Halifax experienced the same drain on the British side. For Warren, as 1812 moved towards an end, larger problems existed. In particular, he continued to experience a shortage of warships. Since June, aside from the six vessels lost to enemy action, two vessels had fallen to French ships and ten to wreck or storm.⁶² Only twenty-seven reinforcing vessels reached North American commands in 1812.⁶³ Considering vessels under repair, notably those of Cockburn, Warren's position had actually weakened since August. Ships under repair, however, often resulted in a useable manpower pool. Even there, he was stymied by an admiralty court in Halifax which proved slow in adjudicating prize cases. Of the 144 vessels taken as prizes during 1812, several could have been bought into the service immediately and crewed with available manpower, providing immense relief on the convoy routes. Eventually, the navy did purchase several vessels for that purpose, but only when the court finally adjudicated the 1812 prizes — in 1813.⁶⁴

⁶¹Master Commandant Charles Ludlow to Hamilton, September 29, 1812, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 1:502-503.

⁶²Gossett, *Lost Ships*, 84-87.

⁶³*Ships in Sea Pay*, July 1, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:168-178. I used sailing dates to calculate reinforcements, with June 18 and December 1 as end points.

⁶⁴Graham, *Empire*, 235; Essex Institute (compiler), *American Vessels Captured by the British During the Revolution and the War of 1812 (Records of the Vice-Admiralty Court at Halifax, Nova Scotia)*. (Salem, Mass., 1911). It should be mentioned that Warren's primary interest in hastening the admiralty court may well have been a desire for the prize money from each sale that automatically went to the admiral commanding, or he may have been pressured by his officers with their desire for the money. Also, delays in handling the cases were not necessarily a matter of incompetent court officers, as the

In addition to the American situation, Warren and the Admiralty shared a common concern that a French squadron escaping from Europe might join the Americans and utterly ravage the West Indian trade, or perhaps, even re-establish France's colonial empire. On the surface, the fear seemed valid, but Wellington, astute as always, placed it in perspective:

If Bonaparte is wise, and has money, he will send out a large fleet. He has no money, however, and he must have found before now that a fleet cannot be equipped and maintained, as he maintains his armies, by requisitions on the unfortunate country which is made the seat of war.⁶⁵

Warren was concerned with the French, burdened with convoys, and under pressure to institute a full blockade of the Chesapeake and Delaware bays. It is little wonder that his final message of the year to the Admiralty, aside from offering suggestions for defeating the large American frigates, begged for additional ships to combat "The Swarms of Privateers and Letters of Marque, their numbers now amounting to 600," throughout his command. Without reinforcement, Warren feared that "the Trade must inevitably suffer, if not be, utterly ruined and destroyed."⁶⁶ With too few ships and too

directions from the Admiralty as to what constituted a legal prize may not have arrived until the very last days of 1812.

⁶⁵As quoted in Forester, *Age of Sail*, 133.

⁶⁶Warren to Secretary of the Admiralty John W. Croker, December 29, 1812, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 1:649-651.

many problems, Warren's composure was already beginning to crumble under the Admiralty's demands for results. There had been little "blockade" in 1812, and little more followed in 1813.

Chapter IV

1813

The Grip Tightens

By spring of 1813, the Admiralty had provided Warren with enough ships to (barely) maintain a military blockade from the Chesapeake north to Boston, to patrol along the New England coast, and to enforce an economic blockade of the Delaware and Chesapeake bays. At the same time, his superiors pressured Warren to destroy the tiny U.S. Navy whose single ship victories were becoming intolerable. Warren responded by staging a major raid into the Chesapeake Bay, hoping to destroy one of the two American warships trapped therein. He accomplished little, except the weakening of his military blockade. Meanwhile, the Admiralty ordered the economic blockade extended to include most of the United States outside of New England. It was, and remained, a paper blockade.

On January 3, Cockburn sailed from Bermuda, winter headquarters of the North American station. Leading his squadron from the *Marlborough*, 74, he had orders to check on the blockaders off New York before detaching vessels to the Delaware, then sailing to blockade the Chesapeake, where the summer campaign would ultimately begin. He arrived off New London on January 29, but contrary winter winds prevented his squadron from reaching Lynnhaven Bay, at the mouth of the Chesapeake, until February 23.¹

¹James A. Pack, *The Man Who Burned the White House: Admiral Sir George Cockburn, 1772-1853* (Annapolis, Md., 1987), 145-146.

As American naval vessels made repairs in port, prepared to sail, or headed home after extended cruises, the schooner *Enterprise*, 12, and the brig *Viper*, 12, sortied from New Orleans. The former returned with minimal results, but the *Viper* fell prey to the British frigate *Narcissus*, 40, after several weeks of fruitless cruising off Havana.²

The chill of winter may have slowed action in the theaters of war, but it did not stop it. American naval vessels remained at sea, privateers continued to capture British merchantmen, and Warren prepared to at last undertake a full military blockade as well as the economic blockade of the Delaware and Chesapeake bays. Trained naval officer that he was, Warren attempted to follow orders to the letter, though he questioned privately and publicly the ultimate success of those orders, leading to an extended correspondence with the Admiralty — and his eventual relief. Both British strategy for 1813 and Warren's continuing dilemma become apparent in examining those letters.

On January 9, the Admiralty advised Warren of its displeasure that “the great force placed at your disposal” had not established an effective blockade and contained or destroyed the American navy. Reluctantly, their lordships proposed to increase his strength to ten ships of the line, thirty frigates, and fifty sloops (other unrated vessels were not mentioned), sharing the expectation that the majority of the vessels, especially the ships of the line, would be returned quickly — as soon as Warren's forces captured or destroyed the large American frigates. The Admiralty also dispatched Captain Henry Hotham to serve as captain of the fleet, relieving Warren of much administrative worry,

²Captain John R. Lumley, R. N. to Warren, January 17, 1813, William S. Dudley, *et al.*, ed., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* (Washington, D.C., 1992), 2:631.

though it expected Hotham to return with the ships of the line.³ In addition to this promised wealth of vessels, the Admiralty committed two battalions of Royal Marines and a battery of artillery, plus transports, to the 1813 campaign. Finally, from their chairs in distant London, the Admiralty criticized Warren because the frigate *Spartan* had been observed sailing alone on November 28, 1812 — a period when the large American frigates were known to be out.⁴

A second communication followed on February 10, in part responding to Warren's letter of December 29, 1812, received in mid-January. Warren could not have enjoyed reading it. The Admiralty criticized Warren for failure to communicate intelligence on British and American naval strength. It estimated that those strengths stood at ninety-seven and fourteen pendants respectively. Their lordships questioned why the outnumbered American fleet still existed, and asked why, since it still existed, had Warren not blockaded the vessels inside their ports. The Admiralty stated flatly that because Warren had failed to accomplish either of those objectives, they had been forced to assign a large number of additional ships to convoy duty, as well as a force of fourteen ships of the line and frigates to patrols in the eastern Atlantic.

Under these circumstances their Lordships are not only not prepared to enter into your opinion that the force on your station was not adequate to the duties to be executed, but they feel that, consistently with what other branches and objects of the public Service require, it may not be possible to maintain on the Coast of America for any length of time a force so disproportionate to the Enemy

³Henry Hotham also served as Melville's informer, advising the Admiralty of the "real" situation in the North American command.

⁴Croker to Warren, January 25, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:14-15.

as that which, with a view of enabling you to strike some decisive blow, they have now placed under your orders.

As for privateers, the only practical answers were “blockading their Ports, and of not permitting our Trade to proceed without protection.” Of course, the Admiralty hoped that the number of privateers at sea were “in a great degree exaggerated; as they cannot suppose that you have left the principal ports of the American Coast so unguarded as to permit such multitudes of Privateers to escape.” To end a thoroughly angry letter, the Admiralty advised Warren that a sloop was being dispatched for the use of the admiral commanding the Leeward Islands station, rather than being assigned to Warren for use in his command, as needed.⁵

Several very important observations can be inferred from these letters. Contemporary British naval strategists tended to concentrate on the enemy fleet and major enemy ports where those fleets were based. The blockade of France had reinforced that strategic outlook, and that blockade had been successful overall. The Admiralty viewed privateers as a nuisance — though a dangerous one — controllable by reliance on a combination of blockade, patrol, and convoy system. Since privateers used the same ports as the enemy navy, the military blockade served to handle both. The switch to the American theater, however, called for a shift in viewpoint that the Admiralty seemed unable or unwilling to make. Geographically, blockading the coasts of the United States posed different problems from blockading Europe. The lack of nearby bases, especially

⁵Croker to Warren, February 10, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:16-19.

when winter virtually closed Halifax, was less important than the longer length of coastline and the numerous bays, inlets, and river mouths to shelter enemy vessels. Unless all of these, as well as the numerous minor ports and recognized major ports, could be at least closely patrolled, then privateering, the sailing of small naval vessels, and the return of prizes could not be stopped.

American privateers proved themselves far different from their French brethren. Most French raiders operated by dashing from a port, securing a prize or two, and quickly returning home, often all on the same day. Even raiders out of the French Caribbean islands used the same procedure.⁶ Most American privateers, schooled to the trans-oceanic trade throughout their careers, engaged in long voyages, especially to the rich sea-lanes off England, Scotland, and Ireland. Nor did they fear for refuge initially, as Napoleon and his allies gladly opened their ports to these vessels and their prizes.⁷ Thanks to such operational differences, the Admiralty continued to place less emphasis on the control of American privateers than on the destruction of the American navy.

Like privateers, the navies of France and the United States differed in size and ability. The French navy was the second largest in the world, and still building vessels on the day of Napoleon's abdication in 1814. Many of its more experienced officers, however, had fled France or died under the Revolution's guillotines, and France's

⁶G. J. Marcus, *The Age of Nelson: The Royal Navy, 1793-1815* (New York, 1971), 361-405. This excellent section covers the key aspects of economic maritime conflict between Britain and France, 1803-1815.

⁷George Coggeshall, *History of the American Privateers and Letter-of-Marque, During Our War With England In The Years 1812, 1813, and 1814* (New York, 1856), 156, 225.

merchant fleet never supplied the number of experienced seamen required to operate its warships effectively. Inexperience, more than any intrinsic superiority of the Royal Navy, doomed French naval endeavors. As early as 1805, Napoleon instituted the *Equipage de Marine*, turning sailors by the thousands into second-class infantry battalions, several of which were assigned to various armies. The losses of 1812 forced an even greater draft from the fleet — at least 8,000 went to the Iberian Peninsula in the last two years of war, while a minimum of 10,000 struggled at Leipzig.⁸ By 1814, the majority of French sailors fought ashore, and the British blockade held at bay wooden hulls manned by ghosts of crews. By early 1813, the strong British military blockade of French ports continued for fear of what could happen, rather than through accurate assessment of enemy capabilities. And that blockade consumed the bulk of the Admiralty's resources.

The American navy was tiny in comparison to the French navy, though it had, at least initially, highly experienced sailors and a skilled officer corps. Just those differences dictated that a change in strategy, if not in tactics, should have been introduced by Britain into the North American theater; yet the Admiralty proved inflexible, treating the American navy as if strong squadrons might erupt from port at any minute. The five U.S. Navy single-ship victories of 1812 certainly served to channel Admiralty actions, acting as a gauntlet thrown down at its feet. Only destruction of the insulting enemy remained an option, and that enemy was no longer the United States, but the U.S. Navy as personified by the frigates *United States*, *President*, and *Constitution*.

⁸René Chartrand, *Napoleon's Sea Soldiers* (London, 1990), 8-40; Jean Delmas, *Histoire Militaire de la France, 2: De 1715 à 1871* (Paris, 1992), 371-407.

The Admiralty's views on British force availability proved as interesting as its focus on American naval forces. One related theme constantly appeared: The numerical superiority of British vessels in the theater of war, as well as the qualitative superiority provided by the ships of the line. The Admiralty's letter of February 10 noted that ninety-seven vessels were available to Warren, but failed to note, as all of those following failed to note, that almost half of those ships were in the Caribbean, while many of the remainder were dedicated to convoy duties. The latter required virtually all of the lighter class of vessels so valuable in inshore work. In fact, Warren, as of March 28, mustered only twenty-eight ships and two tenders for blockade and patrol duty.⁹ When Warren submitted his plan for blockade based on these numbers, the Admiralty offered no comment on the paucity of vessels. They merely suggested that he include a ship of the line with each squadron and maintain a tight blockade of Boston even in winter.¹⁰ Amazingly, the mathematics of thirty British vessels opposing fourteen American warships and dozens of privateers along over 1,000 miles of coast seems to have been overlooked by the Admiralty, and Warren dared not complain, nor could he ask for extensive reinforcements. Admittedly, the Admiralty's urging that Warren "strike some decisive blow" in the letter of February 10 disappeared, but only because Warren had offered a decisive blow of his own: an advance into Chesapeake Bay, with the ultimate aim of

⁹Warren to Croker, March 28, 1813 (Enclosure), Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:80-81. The Admiralty had been made aware of Warren's plans in a prior communication.

¹⁰Croker to Warren, March 20, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:75-78.

destroying commerce, ending the use of the bay as a haven for privateers, and capturing the *Constellation*, then completing its fitting out at Norfolk. With the American frigates, at that time bottled up in northern ports, refusing to run the blockade on less than the most favorable of terms, Warren's plan appeared to be the only viable offensive option (barring major reinforcements of regular infantry and a direct assault on Boston or New York).

A final concern of the Admiralty related to Warren's request that his station commanders in Jamaica and the Leeward Islands be given increased local autonomy, with Warren only taking overall control in the case of a French breakout. Though Warren did not specify his reasons, these stations provided more headaches than assistance on the blockade. As fleet commander, all of the administrative details for the stations fell to him, and with no captain of the fleet to assist (Henry Hotham arrived after this series of letters), it landed atop the administrative details of Warren's own station and squadron paperwork (though Cockburn took over the latter after his arrival). It was Warren's direct responsibility, not the Admiralty's, to provide supplies, ships, and men to his scattered squadrons, as well as integrate them into his own operational plans. Yet, when he tried to exercise command of his squadrons, by shifting ships north from the Caribbean, he received negative feedback from Melville.¹¹ Warren may have also considered that such a shifting of vessels would have readily revealed the true strength at which his blockade operated, perhaps getting the reinforcements that he still desperately needed to maintain

¹¹First Lord of the Admiralty Viscount Robert Saunders Dundas Melville to Warren, March 26, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:78-79. Melville discouraged Warren from weakening the Caribbean stations by shifting ships to the blockade, as the merchants raised a hue and cry at the mere rumor of such a move.

the blockade, protect commerce, and pursue limited offensives. The Admiralty eventually agreed to split the stations, but it would be Warren's replacement in 1814 who reaped those benefits.

On February 4, Captain Charles Stewart of the *Constellation* breathed a sigh of relief as his vessel at last headed for the Capes of the Chesapeake, after weeks of delays in sailing. Imagine his horror at finding two British ships of the line, three frigates, and two smaller vessels just entering the bay. Stewart quickly fled to Norfolk and began preparations to defend the harbor. The next day, the *Emily*, a licensed merchantman out of Baltimore, was turned back, first victim of the economic blockade. The first captures appear to have followed one week later with the taking of two large schooners.¹² Only on February 21, did Warren report to the Admiralty that the commercial blockade of the Delaware and Chesapeake bays, ordered November 27, 1812, now stood implemented.¹³

On February 22, Secretary of the Navy Jones issued an order requiring all vessels to sail individually (after leaving harbor in groups, where possible) to increase the damage to British commerce. He felt the order necessary due to the expected increase of ships on blockade duty.¹⁴ Seemingly making a lie of the circular's basis, one vessel arrived home without seeing a blockader. The *Constitution*, with news of the victory over the *Java*, at last returned to Boston on February 27. Its smaller consort, the *Hornet*, had already

¹²Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Sea Power In Its Relations To The War Of 1812*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1905), 2:9-16; C. S. Forester, *The Age of Fighting Sail* (Sandwich, Mass., 1956), 139.

¹³As quoted in Mahan, *Seapower*, 2:9-10.

¹⁴Circular from Secretary of the Navy Jones to Commanders of Ships Now in Port Refitting, February 22, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:48-49.

began its journey home, and three days earlier had scored its own victory, destroying the British brig *Peacock* off the coast of Guyana.¹⁵ Boston celebrated upon the news of the *Java*'s demise, while Lloyds of London released statistics near the end of February that evoked a different reaction in England. In the words of the *London Times*: "Five Hundred Merchantmen and 3 Frigates! Can these statements be true? And can the English people hear them unmoved? Any one who had predicted such a result of an American War this time last year would have been treated as a madman or a traitor."¹⁶

On March 3, Cockburn at last arrived at Lynnhaven Bay. Ten days later he was joined off Hampton Roads by Warren in the *San Domingo*, 74. This brought total British forces in the bay to four ships of the line, five frigates, two sloops, two brigs, and three tenders, or approximately half of the total vessels available for the blockade of the United States.¹⁷ Such a concentration of force certainly appeared overwhelming.

Cockburn had used the days before Warren's arrival to observe American defensive positions around the *Constellation*, to sound and buoy channels, and to institute the full blockade of the Chesapeake. He determined that only a boat attack could succeed against the American frigate, and upon Warren's arrival, Cockburn attempted three such assaults, each meeting with failure. This course of action proved profitless, and the British

¹⁵Mahan, *Seapower*, 2:7; Lieutenant Frederick A. Wright, R. N., to the Admiralty, March 26, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:70-75. The latter covers the loss from the British perspective.

¹⁶*London Times*, as quoted in Maclay, *Privateers*, xxi.

¹⁷Pack, *Cockburn*, 146; Benson J. Lossing, *Pictorial Fieldbook of the War of 1812* (New York, 1868), 669-671. Availability includes only ships verifiable by name. Both authors hint that other unratets may have been in the bay. Ships were: ships of the line - *Santo Domingo*, *Marlborough*, *Dragon*, *Victorious*; frigates: *Acasta*, *Junon*, *Statira*, *Maidstone*, *Narcisus*; sloops: *Laurestinus*, *Tartarus*; brigs: *Fantome*, *Mohawk*; tenders: *Dolphin*, *Racer*, *Highflyer*.

commanders spent the remainder of the month planning and implementing action against American vessels hiding in the numerous waterways of the Chesapeake.¹⁸

As the plans of Warren and Cockburn developed, the war continued around them. On March 13, Congress authorized the building of six sloops for the Atlantic, and four others for the Great Lakes.¹⁹ Two days earlier, it had nominated two representatives as peace commissioners, possibly because of the knowledge of the impending arrival of a representative of Tsar Alexander, who had offered his services in the negotiation of peace. The representative arrived on March 18, bringing with him the first details of the severe losses experienced by Napoleon in his 1812 campaign.²⁰ Finally, the *Hornet* arrived at Holmes' Hole, Massachusetts, on March 19, loaded with prisoners of war and unchallenged by any blockaders.²¹

In late March, Cockburn learned from American sources of the arrival of the Russian mediator. He forwarded the information to Warren, who discussed and delayed while advising Croker of the opportunity. Croker's answer, dispatched May 17, settled the question of diplomacy:

. . . I have their Lordships Commands to repeat to you their approbation that neither you or Rear Admiral Cockburn should have thought yourselves authorized to enter into any Negotiation, or to defer or relax your measures of hostility on the proposition from the Russian Minister, or from the American Government.²²

¹⁸Pack, *Cockburn*, 146-147.

¹⁹Craig Symonds, *Navalists and Anti-Navalists: The Naval Policy Debate in the United States, 1785-1827* (Newark, Del., 1980), 187.

²⁰Forester, *Age of Sail*, 253; Lossing, *Pictorial Fieldbook*, 471-472.

²¹Captain James Lawrence to Jones, March 19, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:70-72.

²²Croker to Warren, May 17, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:356-357.

Warren's indignation at receiving this critical response can well be imagined, as his original charge, to negotiate peace between the two countries, had never been countermanded, and had been the key reason for his appointment in the first place! The British government refused to accept the offer of mediation; a peaceful ending to a useless little war was no longer the objective. The obsession with regaining face lost to the tiny, despicable enemy navy had blossomed to overwhelming proportions, especially within the Admiralty.

Two additional British communications in March are of interest, one illustrating that analysis and problem solving were occurring, while the second pushed the war to a new level. Both recognized that the struggle with the United States had assumed grim proportions. On March 6, Warren issued a new Standing Order to the North American station:

Their Lordships trust that all the Officers of His Majestys Naval Service must be convinced that upon the good discipline and the proper training of their Ships Companies to the expert management of the Guns, the preservation of the high character of the British Navy most essentially depends, and that other works on which it is not unusual to employ the Men are of very trifling importance, when Compared with a due preparation (by instruction and practice) for the effectual Services on the day of Battle.²³

The order included all practicable practice with great guns and small arms, and a subtle reminder to record everything in the logs, as the Admiralty was watching. Neither

²³Warren, Standing Orders on the North American Station, March 6, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:59-60.

showpiece ships nor niggling concerns about gunpowder expenditure in training had a place in the increasingly dangerous American theater from that point forward.

On March 25, the Council decided to extend the economic blockade from Rhode Island to New Orleans, encompassing all the major ports and patrolling all of the intervening coastline. Lord Melville, hoping to avoid any misunderstandings, addressed a private communication to Warren on the following day:

We do not intend this as a mere paper blockade, but as a complete stop to all trade & intercourse by Sea with those Ports, as far as the wind & weather, & the continual presence of a sufficient armed Force, will permit & ensure. If you find that this cannot be done without abandoning for a time the interruption which you appear to be giving to the internal navigation of the Chesapeake, the latter object must be given up, & you must be content with blockading its entrance & sending in occasionally your cruisers for the purpose of harrassing & annoyance. I do not advert to enterprizes which you may propose to undertake with the aid of the Troops, as these will of course be directed with an adequate force to special objects. I apprehend also that it is scarcely necessary for me to request your most particular attention to the leaving an adequate force on the Jamaica & Leeward Islands The providing of sufficient convoys between Quebec & Halifax & the West Indies will not escape your attention, nor the husbanding & refitting your Force by having a certain number only engaged in cruising, so that the whole may be kept as effective as possible, & your blockading vessels be occasionally relieved.²⁴

Warren received this correspondence sometime between May 17 and 26. He forwarded it to the North American station on the latter date.²⁵ He should have redirected his forces to meet its requirements. As the following pages will detail, however, Warren did not fully implement the new commercial blockade until much later in the year. The admiral still had his eyes fixed on destroying a portion of the U.S. Navy: the *Constellation*.

²⁴Melville to Warren, March 26, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:78-79.

²⁵Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:21.

On April 1, Cockburn received promotion to the rank of admiral. Almost as if to celebrate, he and Warren opened a devastating riverine campaign in the Chesapeake Bay. The next day a successful cutting out expedition on the Rappahanock River netted a privateer, three letter of marque traders, and two merchantmen. By April 5, thirty-six additional sail had been captured, and several driven ashore. The American vessels captured on March 2 had been successfully used several times to enter shallow waterways and approach their uninformed former compatriots, resulting in easy victories.²⁶ By April 22, the fleet stood off the Patapsco, and while Warren cruised and harassed the area with boat attacks, Cockburn formed a light squadron of two frigates and six unrated vessels, eventually raiding in the area of the Elk River. One week later, he briefly captured Frenchtown, burning or destroying five schooners, an artillery battery, munitions, and flour. He also confiscated all the available cattle, though he left British Treasury Bills equivalent to their market value. May 3 found the squadron at Havre de Grace, where it destroyed another battery and a foundry. Unfortunately for the local inhabitants, the militia decided to make a forlorn stand. After scattering them, Cockburn burned much of the village, beginning a policy that he would use throughout the war. If resistance was not offered, Cockburn only destroyed contraband. Resistance, whether militia or individual, forced Cockburn to burn local homes, attempting to discourage repetition of such actions. This policy made Cockburn the most hated man in the British fleet in the eyes of most Americans, who learned to pronounce his name as "cock-BURN" and ridiculed him in

²⁶Pack, *Cockburn*, 150-152.

their press. Yet, the British sailors he saved through such harsh measures idolized him. Georgetown and Fredericktown received the same treatment the next day, and on May 7, having given Americans a taste of real war, Cockburn returned to the bay.²⁷

Outside the Chesapeake, United States military forces remained active. On April 9, the *Chesapeake* entered Boston, having taken only three prizes on its cruise. No British vessels blocked its entry. Six days later, American forces in the Gulf theater seized Spanish Mobile, quickly occupying and improving the fort guarding it, and stationing several gunboats in Mobile Bay. This action left Pensacola as the only Gulf base friendly to Britain. Finally, another of several continual blows to Warren's blockading efforts, the *President* and the smaller frigate *Congress* escaped from Boston on April 30, taking advantage of a favorable wind.²⁸ Though a ship of the line, three frigates, and a sloop blockaded the port and nearby waters, they proved too few for the weather conditions. Only the sloop spotted the American frigates, and it dared not give chase.²⁹

On May 13, Warren and Cockburn took the Chesapeake squadron back to Hampton Roads and the ever strengthening defenses surrounding the *Constellation*. Four days later Warren departed for Halifax with forty prizes. He intended to meet the arriving marines and escort their troopships to the bay. At the same time, Captain Robert Barrie in the *Dragon* escorted thirty prizes to Bermuda. While there, he refitted and replenished

²⁷Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:157-159; Forester, *Age of Sail*, 145; Pack, *Cockburn*, 153-157.

²⁸Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:129-134; Spencer C. Tucker, *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy* (Columbia, S.C., 1993), 158; Lossing, *Pictorial Fieldbook*, 591.

²⁹Captain the Honorable Thomas Bladen Capel, R. N., to Warren, May 11, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:105-106. British vessels were *La Hogue*, *Shannon*, *Tenedos*, *Nymphe*, and *Curlew*.

before returning to the Chesapeake Bay and command of the winter blockading squadron.

Cockburn maintained command from Hampton Roads, intercepting shipping and surveying the area in preparation for the final assault on the *Constellation*.³⁰

Remaining in the Chesapeake presented Cockburn with two major problems (the same problems existed throughout the blockade). First, his vessels needed provisions, fresh produce, and fresh water in great quantity to maintain the health of his crews. Second, his crewmen often deserted to the Americans. The need created a debilitating cycle. The region held abundant supplies, but to get them, men had to be sent ashore. Inevitably some deserted. Occasionally, entire boatloads fled, and once in the country, they found immediate safety. Throughout the Napoleonic wars, the Royal Navy averaged 500 deserters per month — unsurprising in a navy based on impressment and the “cat.” Men served years without pay and, transferred from vessel to vessel, spent years without touching land or seeing loved ones. The closeness of the American coast seemed a siren call that many could not ignore.³¹ Some died trying to reach it, as Stewart wrote to Jones on May 21: “Their loss in prisoners and deserters has been very considerable; the latter are coming up to Norfolk almost daily, and their naked bodies are frequently fished up on the bay shore, where they must have been drowned on attempting to swim.”³²

³⁰Forester, *Age of Sail*, 148-149; Mahan, *Seapower*, 2:160; Pack, *Cockburn*, 155.

³¹James Henderson, *Sloops and Brigs* (London, 1972), 41. *Niles Weekly Register*, September 4, December 4, December 11, 1813.

³²Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2: 162. Note that desertion was not a new problem for the British — it had plagued them in those same waters during the American Revolution. The *Nore*, *Spithead*, and two mutinous crews that attempted to take their ships into French ports had increased the fear of frustrated desertion turning to mutiny during the Napoleonic wars. Even without the fear of mutiny, British captains could never afford to see their hard to replace crews decimated by desertion made easy.

Decatur's *United States*, with the *Macedonian* and the *Hornet*, sailed to Fisher's Island, above New London, on May 24, the first stage of running the blockade. On June 1, Decatur attempted to escape into the Atlantic, but found the way barred by two British warships. Moving too quickly for the entire enemy squadron of two ships of the line, two frigates, and a sloop to unite and trounce him, Decatur fled to a strong defensive position several miles above New London on the North River.³³

June 1 proved to be a very bad day for the U.S. Navy. The *Chesapeake*, under Captain James Lawrence attempted to leave Boston, having orders to sail as soon as possible. Waiting, alone on blockade, Broke in the *Shannon* had been preparing for the encounter for weeks. Heavy gunnery practice, broken only by the burning of prizes — Broke refused to weaken his crew by assigning men to prize crews — had produced a quality long absent from most British vessels. Broke sought battle so eagerly that he had dispatched his consort, the *Tenedos*, and their tender to water. *La Hogue*, 74, had been on station off Boston, but sailed in late May for Halifax, short of provisions. Broke even sent a message to Lawrence, offering single battle. It arrived after the *Chesapeake* sailed.

³³Decatur to Jones, June 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:135-136; Decatur to Jones, June 6, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:136-137; Captain Robert Dudley Oliver, R. N., to Warren, June 13, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:137-138; Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:147-148. Mahan states that three ships of the line, four frigates, and three sloops challenged Decatur's breakout. The actual force, as recorded by those involved, consisted of one ship of the line and one frigate, by the time that the full squadron of two ships of the line, two frigates, one sloop, and three tiny tenders united, Decatur had found safety. Such errors lend a strength to the blockade that just did not exist.

Nevertheless, Lawrence made directly for the *Shannon*, his own death, and the first American frigate loss of the war.³⁴

The victory made Broke a hero — one who never recovered from wounds received during the engagement. The *Shannon* and its prize sailed the following day for Halifax, leaving Boston uncovered, and allowing the brig *Siren* to complete a cruise from New Orleans untouched. In winning his victory, Broke had not only weakened his own patrol area in a pointless effort to provoke a single ship action, he had ignored Admiralty orders and voluntarily left Boston uncovered for over two weeks. No readily available records exist detailing how many privateers and letter of marque traders escaped from Boston in those weeks, nor how many merchantmen, privateers, and their prizes brought needed products into the port. If those records did exist, the true price of Broke's battle for glory, pride, and personal redemption could be measured. Nor was Lawrence without fault. His engagement with the *Shannon*, easily avoided during the early maneuvering of the two ships, was at odds with Jones's Circular of February 22, which stressed the war on commerce. Even victory would have sent the *Chesapeake* limping back to port, ready for additional months of refitting. Lawrence paid with his life for ignoring the true needs of his country; had he emerged victorious, however, death would have been Broke's only alternative to being condemned by court martial. As it was, British Commodore Thomas

³⁴Captain Philip B. V. Broke, R. N., to Lawrence, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:126-129; An Account of the *Chesapeake-Shannon* Action, June 6, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:129-133; Lieutenant George Budd to Jones, June 15, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:133-134. Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:135.

Hardy, commanding the squadron off New York and Boston, issued a circular similar to that of Jones, in which he outlawed needless single ship engagements.

With the Boston squadron dispersed and the New York squadron off New London searching for a way to get at Decatur's ships, the *Argus* sailed from New York on June 8, seeing no enemy sails until seventy miles away, where it narrowly avoided British reinforcements bound for the Chesapeake. Again, a British squadron had failed to keep the blockade in mind, distracted by the chance to capture American frigates, especially the *Macedonian*. This error definitely had a price. Lieutenant William Henry Allen's orders required that he deliver a new ambassador for France to L'Orient, then raid shipping on the coast of England, burning prizes instead of sending them in. By taking the war to England, the secretary of the navy hoped to distract major elements of the Royal Navy while increasing the already loud cries against the war by English merchants. On August 14, the British brig *Pelican* defeated the *Argus*, Allen dying four days later of a wound received in the battle. The final price of the neglected blockade included a diplomatic mission completed and nineteen merchantmen destroyed in British waters, bringing exactly the results that Jones had sought.³⁵

Or almost exactly the results Jones sought — he would have preferred the *Argus* safely home, just as his preference would have been to have the *Chesapeake* cruising in

³⁵Jones to Lieutenant William Henry Allen, June 5, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:141-142; Ira Dye, *The Fatal Cruise of the Argus, Two Captains in the War of 1812* (Annapolis, Md., 1994), 117-290; Dudley W. Knox, *A History of the United States Navy* (New York, 1936), 100.

prize-filled waters rather than captured in some unproductive quest for glory. Future operational orders reflected exactly that:

You are also strictly prohibited from giving or receiving a Challenge, to, or from, an Enemy's Vessel. — The Character of the American Navy does not require those feats of Chivalry and your own reputation is too well established, to need factitious support Whenever you meet an equal Enemy, under fair Circumstances, I am sure, you will beat him; but it is not even good policy to meet an equal, unless, under special circumstances, where a great object is to be gained, without a great sacrifice. — His Commerce is our true Game, for there he is indeed vulnerable.³⁶

June brought additional pressure to the Chesapeake. Cockburn continued raiding and blockading The *Narcissus* captured the revenue cutter *Surveyor* at anchor in the York River on June 12.³⁷ Warren rejoined him on June 19, bringing total forces in the bay to eight ships of the line, twelve frigates, eight unrated ships, several tenders, and six transports carrying 2,650 troops.³⁸ The frigate *Junon* made a last attempt to engage the *Constellation* ship-to-ship on June 21, but fifteen American gunboats and shallow water combined to halt the effort. The next day a direct amphibious landing sought to capture the Craney Island fortifications. Success would have placed the *Constellation* in an untenable position, but American gunnery repulsed the British assault. Substantial

³⁶Jones to Master Commandant George Parker, December 8, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:294-296. Several letters exist with similar paragraphs, all after the loss of the *Chesapeake* and the *Argus*.

³⁷Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:168.

³⁸Lossing, *Pictorial Fieldbook*, 669-671. Pack, *Cockburn*, 157. Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:162-168. Ships in Sea Pay [Extract], July 1, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:168-178.

casualties resulted from the action (between light and heavy, depending on whether American or British reports are read, though both agree that the British lost two barges).³⁹

Despite the failure to capture the American frigate, Warren continued operations in the Chesapeake rather than withdraw and reinforce the greatly stressed coastal blockade. Feeling that he needed a success to justify the presence of the marines, Warren ordered a landing and assault on Hampton, Virginia, for June 26, even though the village was operationally worthless. The British forces achieved a striking victory over militia forces, capturing three stands of colors and seven guns. Unfortunately, two companies of troops, variously identified as Canadian irregulars or French chasseurs (French prisoners serving as skirmishers in exchange for their freedom), began raping, murdering, and pillaging. The incident served to increase the tendency toward barbarity in a war where even Quakers were forced to be less than innocent bystanders.⁴⁰ After bringing the troops under control, Warren allowed them to engage in professional pillage for nine days, resupplying the fleet by that process.⁴¹ While land operations progressed, shallow draft vessels harried shipping for ten miles up the James River, and a heavier force used boat actions to disrupt commerce on the Elizabeth River.⁴²

³⁹Captain John Cassin to Jones, June 23, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:359-360; Warren, to Croker, June 24, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:360-361; Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:163-166; Pack, *Cockburn*, 157-158.

⁴⁰Henry E. Napier, *New England Blockaded in 1814: The Journal of Henry Edward Napier, Lieutenant in H. M. S. Nymphé*, edited by Walter Muir Whitehill (Salem, Mass., 1939), 39-40.

⁴¹Cassin to Jones, June 26, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2: 361-362; Colonel Sir Thomas Sidney Beckworth, British Army, to Warren, June 28, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:362-364; Beckworth to Warren, July 5, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:364-365; Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:166. Pack, *Cockburn*, 158.

⁴²Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:167.

On July 2, additional reinforcements having arrived from England, Warren ordered Cockburn to switch his flag to the *Sceptre*, 74, and lead a small squadron composed of an additional ship of the line, a frigate, and a troopship with 250 marines to raid Ocracoke Inlet. Warren himself, after leaving ten sail in Lynnhaven Bay to blockade the mouth of the Chesapeake, proceeded to the Potomac River. Still intent on destroying American warships, he hoped to reach the corvette *Adams*, refitting below Washington. His vessels entered the Potomac July 13, and advanced thirty miles upstream before shallow water spared the *Adams*. Warren did manage to surprise the American naval schooners *Scorpion* and *Asp* at anchor in the Yeocomico, a tributary of the Potomac. The *Asp* fell to British boarders; its consort escaped.⁴³

Cockburn arrived at Ocracoke on July 12, finding no blockaders present. He quickly seized the village of Portsmouth, which owed its existence and continued survival totally to the thriving transshipment business, transferring goods from deep draft Atlantic traders to shallow draft vessels of the Carolina sounds. Boats moved to capture a privateer and a letter of marque trader anchored just across the bar. Following that success, Cockburn directed his smallcraft to raid into the sound, gathering supplies for the fleet. Four days later, the squadron sailed to rejoin Warren, but only after Cockburn paid the citizens of Portsmouth for the supplies taken by his men. The small force reported to Warren off the Potomac on July 19.⁴⁴ Despite the capture of two vessels of the private navy, Cockburn's raid had accomplished little except invoking fear in some and anger in

⁴³*Ibid.*, 2:167-168; Pack, *Cockburn*, 159.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 159.

others. His recommendation to Warren that a small force of light warships be permanently stationed off Ocracoke went unheeded.

For the remainder of July and August, Warren and Cockburn roved the Chesapeake Bay at will, one day sounding the Severn River and examining Fort Washington, another day cutting out vessels on the Patapsco or rowing up the Miles River to destroy an American battery. Cockburn actually took possession of Kent Island for a month, using it as a watering station and a place for his sick crewmen to recover, safe from desertion that far from the mainland.⁴⁵

On September 6, unwilling to face the region's autumnal "fever season" and continued desertion, Warren split his fleet into three parts. Cockburn in the *Sceptre*, along with several vessels needing long-term repairs and the transports, sailed for Bermuda. The bulk of the fleet, under Warren, escorted all prizes to Halifax, checking on other blockading squadrons in passing. These ships were also sorely in need of refit, and their crews in need of rest. Barrie in the *Dragon*, along with three frigates and two sloops, remained at Lynnhaven Bay to handle the winter blockade and occasionally venture into the Chesapeake proper to discourage local commerce.⁴⁶

Through late June, the northeastern coasts had been unblockaded if not unharassed. A letter to Jones from Captain Isaac Hull, commanding Portsmouth Naval Yard, dated June 14 stated: "The coasting trade here is immense. Not less than fifty sail

⁴⁵Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:168-170; Pack, *Cockburn*, 159-161.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 162; Forester, *Age of Sail*, 148-149.

last night anchored in this harbor.⁴⁷ To combat British patrollers and privateers, Hull planned to use the brigs *Siren* and *Enterprise* as convoy escorts. By June 24, the situation had changed. A frigate, sloop, and two brigs had blockaded the tiny *Enterprise* in port. Hull now proposed using his brigs on short cruises, as coasting appeared completely stopped by this new British squadron.⁴⁸ His proposal, however, was premature. With the concentration of British vessels in the Chesapeake and the demands of convoys to and from Canada, the blockaders soon sailed away. Coastal traffic resumed, as did escort duty. In August, Hull used gunboats to escort shipping around exposed Cape May, and on August 14, these convoy efforts paid dividends when the *Enterprise* and a gunboat teamed to capture a Canadian privateer which had been interfering with coastal traffic.⁴⁹

On September 5, the *Enterprise* cruised the Maine coast, searching for privateers and British patrols. Hearing gunfire off the harbor of Portland, Lieutenant William Burrows investigated, discovering the brig *Boxer*, 14, under Commander Samuel Blyth. After a brief, spirited action, the *Boxer* surrendered. Both captains died early in the engagement. Rumor stated that the captain of the British brig had been paid by the merchants of Portland to escort a Swedish merchantman into port. In case of other British vessels in the area, he fired several shots, to give the appearance of an unsuccessful chase.

⁴⁷Hull to Jones, June 14, 1813, as quoted in Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:186.

⁴⁸Hull to Jones, June 24, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:160.

⁴⁹Tucker, *Gunboat Navy*, 114.

These attracted the attention of the *Enterprise*. No mention of the shots appeared in the official report.⁵⁰

On September 27, the *President* returned to Narragansett Bay. It had taken twelve prizes, and encountered no difficulty achieving an anchorage, actually capturing the blockading squadron's tender, the *Highflyer*, as the large frigate passed through the weak blockade. Most of Warren's ships were still enroute to Halifax or Bermuda for refit and resupply. Only twenty-four ships remained committed to the entire coastal blockade on that date.⁵¹

Stung by the loss of the *Boxer* and the victorious return of the *President*, Warren increased patrols along the northeastern coast. Though an American revenue cutter captured the Canadian privateer *Dart*, 5, on October 13, the American brig *Rattlesnake* found itself and its convoy driven into port by a British frigate on November 1, and held there for several days.⁵² Meanwhile, at last getting back to the business of blockading, Warren extended the Admiralty's economic blockade to include Long Island Sound and Montauk to Black Point. His official justification — "finding that the Enemy by withdrawing his Naval force from the Port of New-York, and establishing at the Port of

⁵⁰Lieutenant David McCrery, R. N., to Commander Alexander Gordon, R. N., September 6, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:234-235; Lieutenant Edward R. McCall to Hull, September 7, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:235-238; Robert G. Albion and Jennie B. Pope, *Sea Lanes in Wartime: The American Experience, 1775-1942* (New York, 1942), 117-118. Albion's is the most recent retelling of this story, borrowed from interviews of local residents done by Lossing. Its accuracy is somewhat dubious, but does fit the grasping nature of many British naval captains during the blockade.

⁵¹Rodgers to Jones, September 27, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:251-254; Warren to Croker, October 16, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:261; Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:129.

⁵²Tucker, *Gunboat Navy*, 114; Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:192.

New-London a Naval Station, to cover the Trade to and from the Port of New-York —” defeats any sense of reason, as the American ships had fled to New London in an attempt to survive against a superior force, and would not leave that port during the war.⁵³

Rather, Warren was driven by the large licensed trade being conducted from the port of New York (often dozens of vessels each day) and the privateers and letter of marque traders escaping under that cover, even as prizes of the Americans safely returned to New York.⁵⁴ It should be noted that a quick blockade announcement entailed potentially rich prizes until word spread, and ships stopped using the newly blockaded stretch of coast. Regardless of purpose, his orders proved too little and too late: Too little because the coast of New England was not included, and too late because the winter season had arrived to hamper blockaders.

As if in mockery of Warren’s proclamation, the *Congress* entered Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on December 14, having taken only four prizes in its long cruise. Finding its timbers rotten, the navy placed the *Congress* in ordinary and shipped its guns to the Great Lakes.⁵⁵ Finally, the *Constitution* exited Boston on the last day of the year; as usual in successful escapes, it sighted no blockaders.

⁵³Warren to Croker, November 20, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:262-263.

⁵⁴Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:171. Mahan quotes a letter from Captain Hayes to Warren, dated October 25, 1813, that complains of the “hundreds of licensed ships” passing his station each day bound for New York.

⁵⁵Captain John Smith to Jones, December 14, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:300-301; Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:130.

British activity along the southern and Gulf coasts during 1813 remained virtually non-existent, though the blockade communicated by Warren to the various stations on March 26, as well as the actual plans he later submitted to the Admiralty, should have kept light units off those coasts at all times. The British frigate *Herald* and its tender attempted to force Mobile Bay, only recently occupied by American forces, on June 3. Three gunboats forced the abandonment of the attempt. The two vessels returned to Mobile in October, with the same results.⁵⁶ In August, the British sloop *Colibri* and brig *Moselle* landed men on Dewe's Island, apparently for watering and provisions, though things may have gotten out of hand. They moved to Hilton Head on August 22, two days after completion of watering. After only three days of patrol, they were forced to flee before a hurricane that savaged Charleston on August 27.⁵⁷ A second storm lashed St. Marys on September 16 and 17, sinking three gunboats, beaching four others, and leaving a final gunboat stranded five hundred yards inland. Quickly repairing this damage, the base commander remained capable of instituting a convoy system between St. Marys and Savannah in early December.⁵⁸ The only other British activity in southern waters involved a cutting out expedition at New Inlet, North Carolina, during October.⁵⁹

The hurricane season that plagued the South had not left the British unscathed. A storm of tremendous proportions had cut a swathe through the Caribbean in late July. It

⁵⁶Tucker, *Gunboat Navy*, 158-160.

⁵⁷P. C. Coker III, *Charleston's Maritime Heritage, 1670-1865* (Charleston, S.C., 1987), 165-168; *Niles Weekly Register*, September 14, 1813. The latter reports the sloop and brig as two brigs.

⁵⁸Tucker, *Gunboat Navy*, 148.

⁵⁹*Niles Weekly Register*, November 6, 1813.

pounded all the major British bases there between August 23 and 26. Though devastating to the population and merchant vessels, the Royal Navy experienced no sinkings, only varying degrees of damage to every vessel on the stations. At the end of a long supply line for masts, spars, cordage, and canvas, refitting was slow. Halifax experienced a similar disaster on November 12. The remnants of a late season hurricane drove every warship in the harbor aground, over thirty receiving damage needing repairs before sailing. Those repairs would still be under way in March of the following year.⁶⁰

Hurricanes and the sailing of the *Constitution* brought a fitting end to the 1813 campaign. For both the Admiralty and Warren, little had gone as planned. Warren failed to activate the initial stage of the Admiralty's 1812 economic blockade until February 21, 1813. This blockade called for his twenty-eight vessels to be deployed as follows: Chesapeake - 6 (plus tender), Delaware - 3, New York - 1, Block Island to Montauk Point - 2, Bay of Fundy - 5, Nova Scotia - 3, Ocrakoke to Beaufort, South Carolina - 2, Savannah to St. Augustine, Spanish Florida - 1, Cruising and relief - 5 (plus tender). The Admiralty had accepted the plan with little comment, despite several glaring weaknesses. Notable among them was that the relief ships were too few to patrol and relieve, causing portions of the coast, notably New England, to go unpatrolled. Warren did not assign Boston, a home base for privateers and returning cruisers, its own patrol, nor could he allow sufficient forces to cover all southern ports, again, refuge for privateers and small cruisers. The Gulf lacked coverage of any kind.

⁶⁰Warren to Croker, December 30, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:307-308; Napier, *Journal*, 3; *Niles Weekly Register*, September 4, 1813, and December 11, 1813.

Given the meager resources allotted to his command by the Admiralty, this was the best plan that Warren could devise, with extra ships to be slotted in as they arrived. Unfortunately, the Admiralty had seen fit to include another strongly made point in their early criticisms of Warren. They continually stressed that the tiny American navy should be destroyed, so that the ships of the line could be returned to England. With those American vessels either snug in port or safe at sea, Warren sought to meet that challenge in the only manner available. His extended foray into the Chesapeake sought destruction of commerce only as a secondary goal, the primary effort was the capture or destruction of the *Constellation* and, possibly, the *Adams*. In the midst of the operation, tentatively approved by the Admiralty, Warren received word that the economic blockade of the Delaware and Chesapeake bays must be immediately extended to include the entire coast from Long Island southwards to New Orleans.⁶¹ With his entire relief and cruising force, as well as every newly arrived vessel, in the Chesapeake, Warren chose to give it lip service only. Even when he received a personal missive from Melville, dated March 26, requesting that he abandon the bay in favor of the blockade if he had not yet captured the *Constellation*, Warren ignored it.⁶² In doing so, he not only left gaps in his existing blockade when ships sailed for provisions or water, he placed his small vessels and frigates at risk, prompting a second order from the Admiralty on July 10 prohibiting British

⁶¹At this time, only the northern entrance to Long Island Sound and the coast of New England were not under economic interdiction.

⁶²Melville to Warren, March 26, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:78-79.

frigates from singly engaging the *Constitution*, *President*, or *United States*, as well as prompting several reminders to keep a ship of the line with each blockading squadron.⁶³

Why did Warren maintain that expedition, so crippling to the blockade? The fault must be placed with the Admiralty's focus on the destruction of the U.S. Navy. Even the two British successes of the year, the capture of the *Chesapeake* and the trapping of Decatur's squadron, reflected that same focus, and each success left holes in the blockade that more than offset the victories gained.

It is easy to see Warren as a beaten man after the Chesapeake offensive and months of effort wasted on American warships that would probably successfully run the blockade over the winter. His extension of the blockade — closing the last entrance to Long Island Sound and adjacent ports — sounded grand on paper, but he did not redeploy to strengthen it, partly due to the dangers of winter to blockaders. The twin hurricanes, striking all of Warren's major bases, must have felt like some holy vengeance, leaving a strong blockade to wait until 1814.

While the British could not establish an effective command of the coast, the United States government needed little help to blockade itself. James Madison, at last concerned at the amount of American commerce going to Britain or its possessions, asked Congress for an embargo on July 20. The Senate, feeling any commerce superior to no commerce, rejected the bill. Madison then asked Jones to use the navy to stop all intercourse with the enemy. He later made the same request of the army.⁶⁴ Jones issued a formal order to that

⁶³Croker to Warren, July 10, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:183-184.

⁶⁴Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:173-174.

effect on July 30.⁶⁵ Despite some successes via the military forces, Madison again requested an embargo, and received approval on December 17. It ended all sailings from and entries into American harbors by native and international vessels, including coasters. Only public and private naval vessels and prizes were exempt. Appeals for additional exemptions could be made directly to the President (to cover island situations).⁶⁶ With the ease of a pen stroke, the British had their economic blockade, courtesy of “Little Jimmy.”

If some Americans showed an interest in helping the British, just as many took a more realistic wartime approach and attempted to visit mayhem on the enemy. One of the most popular ways seemed to be with explosives. On June 5, the crew of the *Victorious* found a “Fulton” floating toward their ship on the tide.⁶⁷ A July attempt to destroy the *Plantagenet* off Cape Henry ended in a premature explosion, and several of these floating mines were emplaced at the narrows of Portsmouth harbor to protect against attack.⁶⁸

A group of New York merchants made the only successful attack of the year. They used the schooner *Eagle* to attempt to destroy Captain Hardy’s *Ramillies*. The merchants loaded the *Eagle* with black powder hidden beneath provisions, the latter always needed by blockaders. The owners hoped it would be moored to Hardy’s flagship when it exploded; instead, only a few crewmen and an officer were unloading the craft into launches — eleven seamen and the lieutenant died. Their deaths in the explosion

⁶⁵Navy Department Circular, July 30, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:205-206.

⁶⁶Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:178.

⁶⁷Pack, *Cockburn*, 156.

⁶⁸Lossing, *Pictorial Fieldbook*, 693.

angered British officers and crewmen, and forced Warren to issue an order that all captures be thoroughly searched before being brought alongside a warship.⁶⁹ On August 23, a submersible attempted to attach a torpedo to the *Ramillies*, and Hardy ordered that his vessel be kept in constant motion and have its bottom swept with a cable every two hours. He also warned the local inhabitants by broadside that he would take harsh measures if one more such “cowardly” act occurred. Apparently they took him as a man of his word, and the *Ramillies* had no further close calls with “infernal devices.”⁷⁰

The war along the Canadian border remained stalemated in 1813, despite Perry’s victory at Lake Erie, September 6. Nevertheless, that theater continued to have its impact on both Americans and British. Aside from the standard recruitment drain on eastern ports, Jones transferred the entire crew of the *Macedonian*, as well as its guns, from the hopeless situation at New London to the Great Lakes.⁷¹ In December, the Admiralty required Warren to lay up four vessels, dispatching their crews and guns westward.⁷² Both navies suffered, but more importantly, when Lord Castlereagh, British secretary of state for foreign affairs, dispatched a note to Madison in November requesting direct peace negotiations, it was quickly accepted, in a large part due to the continued failure to take Canada.⁷³ The news of Napoleon’s defeat at Leipzig, which arrived in Washington

⁶⁹Master Commandant Jacob Lewis to Jones, June 28, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:161; Warren to Croker, July 22, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:162-163; General Order of Admiral Warren, July 19, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:164.

⁷⁰Lossing, *Pictorial Fieldbook*, 693.

⁷¹Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:149-150.

⁷²Graham, *Empire*, 256.

⁷³Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:412-413.

on December 31, probably helped push the decision to accept direct peace talks, though Madison firmly instructed his delegates that no conditions of the declaration of war should be negotiated away. Even with stalemate on the border and Napoleon near collapse in Europe, Madison could insist on such terms — in a large part due to the ineffectiveness of the blockade during the first two years of war.

As some people played with explosives and others prepared to talk, the private navy continued to make inroads into British shipping. With open ports plentiful, privateers ranged the Atlantic. The *True-Blooded Yankee* made its own ports, taking an Irish island for six days, then a Scottish harbor where it burned seven vessels after provisioning and watering.⁷⁴ The Portuguese and Spanish coasts proved a gold mine (more literally, a specie mine) for privateers. In January, the *Dolphin* opened the year with two captures. By mid-year multiple privateers, occasionally working together, captured as many as forty-five vessels in a month. The *Lion* captured fifteen to twenty vessels in November, as well as \$400,000 in specie destined for Wellington's coffers, but soon in American hands.⁷⁵

Thus began a sharp series of letters directly to Melville from Wellington: "Surely the British navy cannot be so hard run as not to be able to keep up the communication with Lisbon for this army!" he wrote, followed by, "I have the honor to enclose a letter containing the report of the capture and ransom of the *Canada*, horse transport, by an

⁷⁴George Coggeshall, *History of the American Privateers and Letters of Marque During Our War with Great Britain in the Years 1812, 13, and 14* (New York, 1856), 168-169.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 128-129, 151-153, 156.

American privateer,” and, “If they only take the ship with our shoes, we must halt for six weeks.” At last, Wellington wrote in disgust: “I am certain that it will not be denied, that since Great Britain has been a naval power, a British army has never been left in such a situation.”⁷⁶ When Melville responded in mid-August with a letter hinting at his own frustration and assigning blame thither and yon, Wellington lashed out:

What I have written has been founded upon my own sense of want of naval assistance on this coast . . . and I assure you that I neither know nor care what has passed, or may pass, in Parliament or in the newspapers on the subject.

I complain of an actual want of naval assistance and co-operation with the army. I know nothing about the cause of the evil, I state the fact, which nobody will deny; and leave it to government to apply a remedy or not as they think proper. . . .⁷⁷

Wellington had developed a low opinion of the Admiralty by the end of 1813, and he certainly knew the cause of his problem: an unblockaded United States, and the horde of privateers harrying his supply line.

For Warren, Cockburn, and the captains responsible for stopping those privateers, 1813 had been a year of misdirection and miscues, capped by natural catastrophe. As winter extended its icy grip, privateers and letter of marque traders ran past Barrie’s Chesapeake blockade on every north wind. Boston and New York simply could not be covered closely without losing vessels in the breakers. The northeast coast was pitiless to patrollers, and the South and Gulf remained unblockaded. With only twenty-five to thirty seaworthy vessels out of Halifax, and similarly reduced squadrons in the Caribbean, is it any wonder that Warren’s last letter of the year to Croker reeked of doom, gloom, and

⁷⁶As quoted in Forester, *Age of Sail*, 90.

⁷⁷Julian Rathbone, ed., *Wellington’s War: His Peninsula Dispatches* (London, 1984), 324.

hopelessness?⁷⁸ After only a little over a year of too few ships, too many contradictory orders, and the resulting failures, Warren was finished. It only remained for Admiralty to select their new champion, hand him his orders, and put him on board a fast ship for Bermuda. Even there, they dithered.

⁷⁸Warren to Croker, December 30, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:307-308. Available ships were determined by a comparative study of all sources.

Chapter V 1814 - 1815 The Wooden Wall Complete

The end of the war with France allowed massive land and naval reinforcements to reach North America. The commercial blockade was finally extended to New England in April, and the new ships at last gave the Admiralty an opportunity to interdict all of the coastal regions of the United States. Instead, a policy of aggressive raiding developed, and the British again concentrated their assets in the Chesapeake Bay. A successful raid on Washington left its government buildings in flames, but an assault on Baltimore was firmly repulsed. In the final analysis, the raiding in the Chesapeake did more harm than good for the blockade and the British cause in general. By the end of December, the peace commissioners meeting in Ghent reached an accord, though the numerous American vessels at sea would continue preying on British merchantmen for several months.

As in the previous year, Cockburn sailed from Bermuda on January 3 for the blockade off Boston and New York. The *Sceptre* found the going difficult and almost foundered before reaching New London. American sources reported that the ship had “hogged,” a report supported by the transfer of Cockburn and most of his officers to the *Albion*, 74.¹ While off New London, Cockburn advised Hardy to cover his furled sails in painted canvas until needed, to prevent their freezing in the rain that usually fell before a

¹“Hogging” is the settling of the bow and stern of a ship, giving the keel a concave appearance. A vessel that had hogged not only lost its capability to sail and maneuver swiftly, it also leaked as its seams continually split in even moderate seas. In this case, the *Sceptre* was returned to Bermuda, out of the war for good.

severe drop in temperature. Cockburn then sailed for the Chesapeake Bay, stopping briefly to inspect the Delaware squadron.²

American vessels also sailed — or attempted to sail — that winter. In early January, the American brigs *Enterprise* and *Rattlesnake* ran the blockade from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, beginning a cruise that ended in March at Wilmington. They captured only four prizes, but none of the vessels had problems entering the unguarded port.³ On the fourteenth of that same month, the *Adams* used the cover of a gale to exit the Chesapeake. It sailed by Barrie's blockading squadron in the same manner that privateers and letter of marque traders had sailed by it throughout the winter. After taking a few prizes, the *Adams* found haven in an unblockaded Savannah on April 29.⁴ The *Constellation* made two attempts to run the blockade in February. Barrie's squadron successfully blocked both.⁵ The sloop *Frolic* enjoyed more success in sallying from Boston on February 18, though its luck expired April 20, overmatched by the British frigate *Orpheus* off Cuba. The *Frolic* had taken only one prize.⁶ The *Peacock* escaped New York the first week of March, tasked with delivering military supplies to St. Marys.

²James A. Pack, *The Man Who Burned the White House: Admiral Sir George Cockburn, 1772-1853* (Annapolis, Md., 1987), 164-166; *Niles Weekly Register*, February 6, 1814.

³Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Sea Power In Its Relations To The War Of 1812*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1905), 2:232.

⁴Captain Robert Barrie, R. N., to Warren, November 14, 1813, William S. Dudley, et al., ed., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* (Washington, D.C., 1992), 2:395-396; Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:178,261. Also, the *Niles Weekly Register* between October 1813 and March 1814 lists successful entrances and exits of privateers, letter of marque traders, and occasional prizes in almost every issue.

⁵Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:178.

⁶G. J. Marcus, *The Age of Nelson: The Royal Navy, 1793-1815* (New York, 1971), 474.

Touching only long enough to unload and resupply, the sloop began a cruise that netted fifteen prizes, including one of His Majesty's brigs.⁷ In the Pacific, the epic cruise of Captain David Porter and the *Essex* ended under the guns of the British frigate *Phoebe* and sloop *Cherub* on March 28. Since 1812, Porter had taken over forty prizes and virtually destroyed the British whaling industry in the Pacific.⁸

The military blockade seemed virtually nonexistent in the opening months of the year. A continued lack of ships, the wear of the Chesapeake campaign, and damage from hurricanes in late 1813 forced Warren to leave most of the coast either weakly patrolled, or not patrolled at all. British trade suffered for it, as ship after ship vanished to foreign and American ports, sailed home on promise of ransom, or were burned by their American captors.

The economic blockade was another matter. It certainly gave the appearance of success in the opening months of 1814 — unarmed merchantmen no longer ran the blockade, coastal trade had ended, and neutrals no longer entered American ports. Such success, however, had little to do with the Royal Navy's close blockade. Instead, Madison and Congress had embargoed their nation in the name of ending illegal trade with Great Britain and stopping American assistance to the Royal Navy. The embargo succeeded in neither. Smuggling via the Canadian border continued. The water-dependent smuggling with Amelia Island simply diminished slightly in quantity, despite the

⁷Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:255; Forester, *Age of Sail*, 216.

⁸Dudley W. Knox, *A History of the United States Navy* (New York, 1936), 100-108.

naval forces based at St. Marys. Many British officers still received their newspapers, though they had to send forces ashore to fetch them instead of having them delivered. Most importantly, the embargo crippled American internal trade and stopped the duties that provided most of the income of the United States government. Already in debt, Madison severely erred in denying that trade.

By the new year, changing circumstances had made the long existing non-importation laws as well as the embargo untenable. Great Britain now had access to the ports and markets of northern Europe, so attempts to injure Britain via economic coercion were no longer viable. At home, Madison's embargo had angered those who depended on the coasting trade for livelihood and markets. It had increased smuggling without diminishing interactions with British buyers. The embargo had failed, and on March 31, he requested its repeal. Congress met his request on April 4, by which date almost four months of opportunity for trade in the face of a British blockade that would never be weaker had been lost.⁹

In truth, the blockading officers seemed happier to see the end of the embargo than many Americans. Captain C. Upton, charged by his admiral to gather intelligence on the disposition and status of the U.S. Navy in New England, concluded his April 6 response

⁹Donald R. Hickey, "American Trade Restrictions during the War of 1812," *The Journal of American History*, 68 (Dec 1981), 517-538. *Niles Weekly Register*, January 22, 1814, editorialized: "It is truly distressing to observe the prevalence of treasonable practices in the United States." Henry E. Napier, *New England Blockaded in 1814: The Journal of Henry Edward Napier, Lieutenant in H. M. S. Nymphé*, edited by Walter Muir Whitehill (Salem, Mass., 1939), 18, wrote: "Self, the great ruling principle, more powerful with Yankees than any people I ever saw. Begin with a dollar and proceed to any amount, you may always buy a Yankee in almost any rank and station!"

with: "The Embargo has been so rigid, I have not met a single vessel out-ward-bound, or seen a News-paper later than the 11th March, nor have I observed thro' any other channel, any species of Intelligence worthy [of] communicating."¹⁰ Yet, the loss of intelligence sources was less the issue than the loss of revenue. Lieutenant Henry Edward Napier, fresh to Boston Bay on board the frigate *Nymphe* in early April, enthusiastically noted in his journal:

At daylight on the seventh spoke an American fisherman, who informed us that the Embargo had been taken off twelve days ago The prospect of making money is a pleasing one to most people, at least it is so to a poor devil like myself. Therefore the repeal of the Embargo Act gave us all great pleasure, as the coasting trade is very considerable and like a spout it rushes with double force when the impediment which stopped it is removed.¹¹

And so it seemed to be. The *Nymphe* stopped numerous coasters and fishing vessels from April through July, a few under license, some to be taken as prizes, but most to be ransomed. For the captains on station ransom made sound fiscal sense. The vessels were so small as to bring nothing in a prize court and the populace needed the vessels — especially the fishing smacks — to survive. If a little money could be made by not burning their vessels, and burning brought nothing at all, then leaving Americans with their harmless fishing boats, for a price, was sound business. For page after page, Napier noted in his journal ransoms that totaled thousands of dollars. Eventually, disturbed by what in a time of peace would be labeled extortion, the young lieutenant wrote: "Making prize

¹⁰Captain C. Upton, R. N., to Rear Admiral Edward Griffith, R. N., April 6, 1814, UkENL, Alexander F.I. Cochrane Papers.

¹¹Napier, *Journal*, 10. Note that the date given by the American fisherman was inaccurate.

money resembles killing a sheep; one likes to eat it but cannot bear the distress of the animal's death."¹² Notations in the newspapers of the period suggest that Napier's compassion was in the minority among British officers.

Along with taking or ransoming prizes during the day, the *Nymphe* often engaged in boatwork at night. The boats crept into the local harbors and bays, cutting out any likely coasters and burning the remaining vessels. Day or night, however, the words of Napier reveal a strong concentration on coastal traffic — a concentration perhaps more accurately described as tunnel vision. The frigate encountered four American vessels bound to or from the Atlantic during Napier's stay, a merchantman (possibly an American prize), a letter of marque trader, and two privateers. Three of the ships safely entered harbor, while one of the privateers escaped to plunder British shipping.¹³ Three reasons existed for such focus towards the land: observation of American warships, distraction by the ready wealth of coasting traffic, and, after April 1, the orders of Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, who replaced Warren as commander of the North American station.

The coming of spring brought two additional changes to the blockade, aside from the lifting of the embargo. In Europe, Napoleon failed to find a strategy to defeat the larger allied armies. Short of men and almost totally lacking in support from the French populace, he could only delay the date of his abdication. Paris capitulated on March 30,

¹²*Ibid.*, 24.

¹³*Ibid.*, 22, 27, 31, 33.

and Napoleon abdicated April 4.¹⁴ During the winter and spring, British reinforcements to North America increased slightly, and with the French surrender, the potential for massive reinforcements existed. Instead, a British government now deeply in debt chose to reduce its costs by immediately placing as many vessels as possible in ordinary. The number of warships available to the North American command increased to approximately eighty-five, enough to barely meet the needs of blockade without convoy duties.¹⁵

The North American command itself had changed in structure on January 25, though final implementation occurred only in the spring. The Admiralty advised Warren that the command was to be separated into its component stations, as he had initially sought in the spring of 1813. Since the North American station required only a vice admiral, *Admiral Warren* would be relieved as soon as feasible.¹⁶ Intentionally or not, it was the best way to ease into retirement a man who had given years of his life to the defense of his country.

The Admiralty selected Vice Admiral Sir Alexander Forrester Inglis Cochrane as the new commander at Halifax. Cochrane had served against the Americans during the Revolutionary War, gaining post rank in the West Indies. During the long war with France, he had discovered the misery of blockade duty in the Channel (serving briefly

¹⁴Trevor N. Dupuy, Curt Johnson, and David L. Bongard, eds. *The Harper Encyclopedia of Military Biography* (Edison, N.J., 1995), 537.

¹⁵Apparently, a "Ships in Sea Pay, July 1, 1814" was not completed due to the rush to demobilize (per Public Records Office, London), and the journals covering those months (Steel's or Murray's *List of the Navy*) have not been available. Approximate strength for 1814 was determined from analysis of vessel names and numbers mentioned in primary and secondary sources.

¹⁶Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:330.

under Warren) followed by a wealth of small boat experience in the Mediterranean. From 1805 to 1814, Cochrane served as commander-in-chief of the Leeward Islands station (again under Warren for part of that time). He was knighted for his efforts in the Battle of Santo Domingo in 1806.¹⁷ At age fifty-six, Cochrane appeared young, energetic, and successful. He also possessed another quality that made him, in the eyes of Admiralty, the best choice for the role: Sir Alexander Cochrane hated America and Americans. In 1781, while a young Alexander made post in the Leeward Islands, his brother had died at Yorktown.¹⁸

Table 4 **Cochrane's Proposed Blockade of March 8, 1814**

Patrol Area	Line	Razee	Frigate	Sloop	Unrated
Gulf of St. Lawrence			1	2	1
Nova Scotia to Cape Breton			2	3	2
Bay of Fundy to Boston Bay		1	2	3	2
Boston Bay to Nantucket	2		3	3	2
Rhode Island and Long Island Sound	1	1	2	3	1
New York	2	1	2	2	1
Delaware	1		3	2	1
Chesapeake Bay	1	1	4	4	4
Coast of North Carolina to Charleston			2	2	
Charleston to Tybee		1	2	3	1
Tybee to St. Augustine, Fla.			2	3	1
New Providence			2	4	2
Gulf of Mexico			1	4	2
Totals:	7	5	28	38	20

Source: Vice-Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, R. N., to Secretary of the Admiralty John W. Croker, 8th March 1814, UkLPR, Adm. 1/505.

¹⁷Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee, eds., *Dictionary of National Biography* (London, 1885-1901), 4:615-616.

¹⁸C. S. Forester, *The Age of Fighting Sail* (Sandwich, Mass., 1956), 202.

Cochrane arrived in Bermuda the first week of March, though the exchange of command did not occur until April 1. Cochrane used his time to study the situation and make plans. He dispatched a letter outlining his plan of blockade, ship status, and needs in vessels and men to Croker on March 8 (Table 4).

Cochrane noted that this blockade, which included the coast of New England, required a total of 30 frigates, 40 sloops, and 20 unrated vessels, as well as the listed razees and ships of the line for a total of 102 hulls. These did not include convoy escorts. At the time of the letter, the North American station had an estimated strength of 15 ships of the line, 4 razees, 15 frigates, 17 sloops, and 7 unrateds, or a total strength of 58 vessels to blockade the coast *and* cover convoys. Cochrane also requested additional men, both to replace the shortages on the station and to activate several suitable ships among prizes at Halifax and Bermuda. That was exactly the same as Warren's requests of 1812 and early 1813 except for two differences: Cochrane wrote far more professionally, and his words reflected the positive attitude of a man not yet thrown into the crucible.¹⁹ As with Warren, however, the new commander-in-chief did not receive everything for which he asked.

The Admiralty had issued Cochrane orders upon his selection for command. The primary responsibility remained the military blockade of the United States, the secondary

¹⁹Cochrane to Croker, March 8, 1814, UkLPR, Adm. 1/505. A portion of the letter, as well as the ship list, was missing. Possibly, the slight difference between the quantity of vessels listed by location and those enumerated in his commentary was explained in the missing section. Also, Cochrane refers to unrated vessels as "armed vessels." To avoid confusion with another use of the term - armed private vessels hired by Admiralty as convoy escorts - I used the more common nomenclature.

responsibility continued to be the economic blockade of all areas except New England. Finally, the Admiralty ordered Cochrane to create a diversion in the Chesapeake and along the coast that would tie down local troops and militia, preventing their transfer to the critical Great Lakes theater. To accomplish the latter, a brigade of troops from Wellington's forces would be transferred to Bermuda as soon as the European situation allowed.²⁰

Cochrane took his orders to heart. The April 7 raid on Pettipau, eight miles up the Connecticut River, was the first of an increasing series of boat attacks in areas previously untouched by the Royal Navy.²¹ Other raids followed, ranging from the Chesapeake Bay through the New England coast, with the *Niles Weekly Register* exclaiming, on July 9: "The eastern coast of the United States is much vexed by the enemy. Having destroyed a great portion of the coasting craft whose owners were hardy enough to put to sea, they seem determined to enter the little out ports and villages and burn every thing that floats."²²

Even more revealing was an April 24 communication from Cochrane to Cockburn:

You are at perfect liberty as soon as you can muster a sufficient force, to act with the utmost hostility against the shores of the United States. Their government authorize and direct a most destructive war to be carried on against our commerce and we have no means of retaliating but on shore where they must be made to feel in their property what our merchants do in having their ships destroyed, and thereby be taught to know that they are now at the mercy of an invading foe. This is now the more necessary in order to draw off their attention

²⁰Croker to Cochrane, January 25, 1814, UKLPR, Adm. 2/1376.

²¹*Niles Weekly Register*, April 30, 1814: 20 vessels burned. Napier, *Journal*, 24, describes a similar raid on Scituate Harbor, netting two prizes and burning eight hundred tons of shipping.

²²*Niles Weekly Register*, July 9, 1814.

from Canada where, I am told, they are sending their whole military force. Their sea port towns laid in ashes and the country invaded will be some sort of retaliation for their savage conduct in Canada, where they have destroyed our towns . . . It is therefore but just that retaliation be made near to the seat of government from whence these orders are enacted.²³

Having made his intentions toward the American coast clear to his subordinates, Cochrane turned his attention to the economic blockade. Understanding the folly of leaving a large stretch of the coastline unblockaded, he issued a proclamation extending the economic blockade to New England.²⁴ Despite reinforcements, length of coast and shortage of ships resulted in a paper blockade. The obvious nature of Cochrane's proclamation forced James Madison to respond publicly, condemning the illegality of Great Britain's actions. Addressing the international community, he promised neutrals that the U.S. Navy would not interfere with their entry or exit into American ports.²⁵ Madison gained little with his rhetoric.

He had a point, though: Enforcing the blockade differed greatly from proclaiming it. The *Constitution* proved that once again when it spent two days unmolested outside the Charleston bar in March, then made port at Marblehead on April 3, closely chased by two British frigates. Two weeks later, the *Constitution* sailed unmolested to Boston for a refit, having taken four prizes and run a small man-of-war aground.²⁶ On April 29, the

²³As quoted in Pack, *Cockburn*, 166-167.

²⁴By the Hon Sir Alexander Cochrane [Cochrane], A Proclamation, April 25, 1814, UKENL, Alexander F.I. Cochrane Papers; Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:11. An Order in Council of May 31, 1814, gave official blessing to the extension.

²⁵Proclamation of James Madison, June 29, 1814, MiU-C, Goulburn Collection.

²⁶Tyrone G. Martin, *A Most Fortunate Ship: A Narrative History of Old Ironsides*, Revised Edition, (Annapolis, Md., 1997), 184-188.

Peacock captured the British brig *Epervier* off Cuba. The American sloop returned to an unblockaded Savannah on May 4; its prize had arrived two days earlier.²⁷ The sloop *Wasp* escaped Portsmouth, New Hampshire, with no enemy in sight on May 1. At least twelve vessels, including two Royal Navy brigs, struck to the *Wasp* before it disappeared in the Atlantic in October.²⁸ Like other cruisers, the *Adams* found no British ships off Savannah on May 5, when it began a journey to the African coast, and the *Peacock* sailed unmolested from the same port June 4, for a cruise in Irish waters.²⁹ Nor had coasting stopped: the New York Gunboat Flotilla escorted forty coasters from Saybrook, Connecticut, to New London on May 19. Despite a running battle with three British warships, all vessels made port safely.³⁰ In the South, coasters plied back and forth from Charleston to St. Marys virtually undisturbed through early August.

Consistently, Cochrane's blockade failed to stop the sailing, or returning, of American warships and privateers. One reason, as often stressed, was a simple lack of vessels. Yet, Americans reported only two reliable sightings of British patrol groups on the southern coast between January and early August — a group of three small warships off Charleston in March and the razee *Majestic* and a sloop at St. Marys in May. None of the ships lingered, though the latter briefly engaged two gunboats while sounding the bar.³¹ Where were the vessels? Apparently the damage from the 1813 storm at Halifax

²⁷Knox, *USN*, 129.

²⁸Forester, *Age of Sail*, 214-216, Knox, *USN*, 129.

²⁹Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:261-2.

³⁰Spencer C. Tucker, *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy* (Columbia, S.C., 1993), 117-118.

³¹*Ibid.*, 143, 150.

kept a number of them in port as late as May 1814. The opening convoys of the year also required extra coverage. Cochrane concentrated the remaining vessels on the Chesapeake and northwards, especially the previously unblockaded New England coast.

That accounts for the unblockaded ports in the South, but how could American warships and privateers continually run the blockade into northern ports without losing at least one vessel? Weather provides part of the answer. The cold and storms of the 1813-14 winter continued into May, while persistent fogs lingered into the summer. Perhaps more importantly, Cochrane's urge to strike American ports, to carry the war home to the American populace, took ships off station for raids. Crews and captains focused on burning, prize-taking, and ransom, instead of on the military blockade.³²

Meanwhile Cochrane's operational planning assumed proportions beyond the blockade of the United States. As outlined in a letter to Earl Bathurst on July 14, it included an attack on Washington or Baltimore, followed by the capture, apparently with intent to hold, of the Gulf coast from Pensacola to New Orleans. The latter effort would be supported by massive slave uprisings and Indians, operating as native auxiliaries. The ravaging of coastal towns would continue. In this, as in other letters, Cochrane never mentioned bringing peace — his goal was to bring destruction to America.³³

³²A careful reading of Napier's words drives both points home.

³³Cochrane to Secretary for War and Colonies Earl Bathurst, July 14, 1814, UkENL, Alexander F.I. Cochrane Papers; Cochrane to Croker, June 20, 1814, UkLPR, Adm. 1/506. The letter of June 20 carried the same information to the Admiralty, minus much of the invective.

From Cochrane's perspective, Indian aid and slave uprisings appeared very feasible. Part of his original orders of January 25 had been to investigate the possibility of aid from the Creek and Choctaw nations on the Gulf coast. He had dispatched the frigate *Orpheus*, Captain Hugh Pigot, to negotiate with the tribes in early April. Pigot's report proved positive, and Cochrane dispatched weapons, as well as a cadre of Royal Marines, to the Gulf in late July.³⁴ Both Pigot's report and a May 10 letter from Cockburn offered hope of the slave uprising. Cockburn, who had been freeing slaves since the previous year and resettling them in Bermuda or Jamaica, wrote that Americans tried desperately to keep their slaves from his squadron, while the 400-strong "Colonial Corps" organized over the winter performed well as skirmishers.³⁵ As it happened, the Creek and Choctaw refused to march without the British army at their side, while slaves simply failed to respond to the call for rebellion. The expected aid did not materialize when the campaign began.

The Admiralty accepted Cochrane's plan wholeheartedly. Their letter of August 10 detailed the New Orleans effort, which had to wait until later in the year pending the availability of additional reinforcements from Wellington's army. Meanwhile, Cochrane was free to use the first battalions from the Peninsular Army in other endeavors.³⁶ Those

³⁴Captain Hugh Pigot, R. N., to Cochrane, June 20, 1814, UkLPR, Adm. 1/504.

³⁵Rear Admiral George Cockburn, R. N., to Cochrane, October 5, 1814, UkLPR, Adm. 1/504.

³⁶Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:385.

units, eventually reinforced to 4,500 men, arrived at Bermuda July 25, under the command of Brigadier General Robert Ross, one of Wellington's best officers.³⁷

President Madison, unaware of what the immediate future held for his capital city, asked James Monroe to draft the most pivotal communication since the coming of war to the peace commissioners on June 27:

On mature consideration . . . you may omit any stipulation on the subject of impressment, if found indispensably necessary to terminate it [the war]. You will of course not recur to this expedient until all your efforts to adjust the controversy in a more satisfactory manner have failed.³⁸

Madison never recorded his reasons for choosing this moment to drop the single issue that had plagued Anglo-American relations since 1793, but they can be extrapolated with some certainty.

The Canadian border remained stable, with the American navy dominant on Lake Erie. The army had gained strength — though nowhere near the strength planned — and experience, but little hope remained of conquering Canada, a critical part of initial military goals. On the coast, the South and Gulf had not been blockaded, though depredations against other coastlines continued to increase. Vessels of the U.S. Navy and the private navy continued to sail, disrupting Britain's shipping, usually returning home, and often getting prizes into port. The nation, as a whole, seemed more willing to fight than on the day that war was declared. Though the nation was self-sufficient — no one starved, and the implements of war continued to be produced — its government had little money,

³⁷Pack, *Cockburn*, 179.

³⁸As quoted in Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:266.

thanks to the tremendous expenses associated with warfare, Madison's embargo, and the economic blockade.

The single most influential event occurring immediately before June 27 seems to have been the arrival in New York, on June 9, of the news that Napoleon had abdicated.³⁹

The American declaration of war against Great Britain had occurred at the apex of Napoleon's powers, when British resources were stretched to their utmost. His abdication did not mean the end of impressment as an issue; another war in a month or a year could quickly return it to the fore. Instead, Napoleon's end meant the release of hundreds of ships and thousands of the best soldiers in the world for service against the United States.

Madison's nightmares no longer centered on the blue cloth of the Royal Navy, cruising off the American coast, but on the red of Wellington's fusiliers, marching through American grain fields. Both comparative evaluation and timing point to the end of the Anglo-French conflict as Madison's reason for dropping the demand that impressment be the key issue of the peace talks.

Cochrane's thoughts in July did not dwell on peace, but destruction. After receiving a letter from Lieutenant General Sir George Prevost, commander of army forces in the Great Lakes theater, which described the willful destruction of private property by American forces, Cochrane notified the Admiralty that he would visit the same upon the

³⁹Charles J. Ingersoll, *History of the Second War Between the United States of America and Great Britain, Declared by Congress the 18th of June, 1812, and Concluded by Peace the 15th of February, 1815* (Philadelphia, 1852); 122.

American coast.⁴⁰ He proceeded to issue orders on July 18 requesting that his captains burn all villages, towns, and private property that they could reach. Secret orders accompanied the public orders, requiring the captains to refrain from damage to the property of sympathizers, or in areas that British forces might occupy.⁴¹ President Madison responded to this order with outrage, calling upon the people to unite against such barbarity, and upon Cochrane to rescind his order. Cochrane responded that he could rescind the order only with the permission of the Admiralty, and that would not be forthcoming.⁴² Fortunately for all concerned, his officers disregarded the order in the main.

Ross and his forces reached the Chesapeake on August 15, joining Cochrane. The fleet numbered some fifty-one sail, including twenty transports. The admiral implemented the first portion of his grand plan immediately. He ignored Norfolk, where the *Constellation* was still anchored, though it would have fallen easily to an attack from landward. Of Boston — economic entrepot, ship building center, and home port for numerous privateers — and Washington — governmental center and naval facility — he chose the latter for his first assault. The American naval defenders, severely outnumbered, burned their flotilla and joined the local army as artillerymen. British forces landed at

⁴⁰Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2: 120-121. Prevost referred to the burning of Newark on December 10, 1813, by retreating Americans. The act sparked a wave of retaliation and counter-retaliation along the Canadian frontier.

⁴¹Cochrane to Croker, July 18, 1814, UKLPR, Adm. 1/506; General Orders from Vice Admiral Cochrane, July 18, 1814, UKENL, Alexander F. I. Cochrane Papers; Secret Memorandum from Vice Admiral Cochrane, July 18, 1814, UKENL, Alexander F. I. Cochrane Papers.

⁴²*Niles Weekly Register*, September 10, 1814; October 1, 1814.

Benedict on the Patuxent River on August 19, roundly defeated the American forces at Bladensburg five days later, and burned the public buildings of Washington that night. By August 26, British forces had rejoined the fleet, having penetrated fifty miles into hostile territory, defeated an enemy blocking force, and put flames to the American capital.⁴³

On August 19, a small British force began working up the Potomac River toward Alexandria, Virginia. Fort Washington, barring their way, was voluntarily destroyed at the sight of the British forces. The squadron stayed at Alexandria for three days, then fought its way back to the bay on September 9, bringing twenty-two richly laden prizes with it.⁴⁴ Despite its success, it delayed the concentration of the fleet after the Washington attack: Cochrane had decided to burn Baltimore as well. He needed the bomb vessels that had sailed with the Alexandria squadron, and he was afraid of losing the entire force to some disaster on the Potomac.

His delays allowed the strengthening of Baltimore's defenses, especially the militia needed to defend the landward side of the city. Cochrane did not begin the assault until September 12. Ross promptly met his demise at the hands of an American rifleman; his successor proved unable to carry the landward side of the city. During that night and into the next day, Cochrane attempted to destroy Fort McHenry by naval bombardment. He failed, and unable to gain clear access to the harbor, sailed for the mouth of the bay. Cochrane split his force at that point. He detached a small squadron to blockade and

⁴³Pack, *Cockburn*, 180-190.

⁴⁴Forester, *Age of Sail*, 230-231.

harass the bay, while Cockburn was ordered to Bermuda for a quick refit before assuming responsibility for the blockade of St. Marys, Savannah, and Charleston. Cochrane took the remainder of the fleet to Halifax, checking his blockading squadrons in route.⁴⁵

What exactly had Cochrane accomplished? In support of the blockade, he had removed twenty-two small vessels that probably would not have voluntarily left the shelter of the Potomac basin. Cochrane had caused the scuttling of a gunboat flotilla which could never have affected the blockade of the Chesapeake, and he had forced the burning of the Washington Navy Yard. He had also tied down thirty British warships that could have been used to place the American coasts under even tighter blockade.

Politically, he had burned the capital and some government records. If it had been the capital of *The* United States instead of the capital of *These* United States, there might have been some effect. Unfortunately for Cochrane, the young nation depended far less on its capital than European countries depended on theirs. The government was functioning as well as ever within days. Nor did the popular response fit the mold of a defeated people. The "Burning of the White House" became more rallying cry than whimper. The abortive assault on Baltimore actually strengthened the American will to resist: They saw firsthand that neither Wellington's veterans nor the massed Royal Navy were invincible.

There can be no doubt that the Admiralty, the War Office, and Cochrane had made major errors in strategic planning and operational implementation. This time it was not

⁴⁵Walter Lord, *The Dawn's Early Light*, (New York, 1972). Lord's book provides an indepth look at the attack on Baltimore.

just the ineptitude of the blockade and economic misery that resulted, for the American commissioners at the peace talks saw the initiative swing firmly to them. That initiative would not be relinquished.

The Chesapeake Bay offensive was one of three initiated by the British in 1814. Governor Sir John Sherbrooke of Canada received a directive to occupy enough of the District of Maine and nearby islands to guarantee communications between Halifax and Quebec. Supported by a fleet under Rear Admiral Hardy, Sherbrooke seized Eastport, Maine, on July 11.⁴⁶ On August 14, the *Adams*, bound for Boston after a successful cruise, damaged its bottom off Castine, and decided to anchor at Hampden, twenty-seven miles up the Penobscott River, until repairs could be made.⁴⁷ Unfortunately for the vessel, the British seized Castine and Machias, sealing the river's mouth. The captain of the *Adams* ordered it burned to avoid capture by the British. Hardy gave the inhabitants of the area the option to stay if they swore allegiance to the crown. Many would not do so, and 25 percent of the population departed southwards, leaving all their possessions behind.⁴⁸

British strategists had designated both the raids within the Chesapeake and the occupation along the Canadian border as secondary efforts to the real invasion. They calculated that those operations would draw men and material away from the main thrust

⁴⁶Ingersoll, *History*, 116.

⁴⁷Knox, *USN*, 129.

⁴⁸Gerald S. Graham, *Empire of the North Atlantic: The Maritime Struggle for North America* (Toronto, 1950), 260; *Niles Weekly Register*, October 6, 1814; Ingersoll, *History*, 116.

in the Great Lakes theater. There, on August 11, Governor-General Sir George Prevost, with 11,000 men including many Peninsular veterans, advanced along the west bank of Lake Champlain. His advance was stopped cold, not by a victorious American army, but by the naval victory at Plattsburg on September 11. Without the British navy to protect and provide his logistical support, Prevost had little option but to retreat.⁴⁹ Like the British failure at Baltimore, Plattsburg held significance in Ghent, especially in the minds of British commissioners who had hoped for so much and received so little.

The southern coast finally received attention in late August. Blockaders appeared off Charleston, Savannah, and St. Marys with distressing regularity. Local papers recorded that a ship of the line, frigate, sloop, and two brigs made up the squadron that patrolled their coast.⁵⁰ By late August the squadron's depredations upon the coasting trade forced the commander at St. Marys to institute convoys for its protection.⁵¹ The largest such convoy contained eighty-eight sail, giving some idea of the volume of coasting overlooked by the British before late 1814. Captain Campbell estimated that his gunboats safely escorted \$6,000,000 in trade over the St. Marys River to the Savannah route between late August and mid-October.⁵² The running battles behind the barrier islands of Georgia continued through the remainder of the year. Neutrals sailed unmolested to Spanish Amelia Island, and sailed out with American cotton. Campbell

⁴⁹Marcus, *Age of Nelson*, 480-481.

⁵⁰*Republican and Savannah Evening Ledger* (Savannah, Ga.), July 30, 1814; August 16, 1814; August 27, 1814; October 8, 1814; October 13, 1814.

⁵¹Campbell to Jones, September 3, 1814, DNA, RG45, 1814, Vol. 7, No. 2.

⁵²Tucker, *Gunboat Navy*, 150-152.

wrote to Jones on November 11, 1814: "The trade to Amelia Island is immense. Upwards of fifty square-rigged vessels are now in that port under Russian, Swedish, and Spanish colors."⁵³

On January 12, 1815, forces under Cockburn seized Cumberland and St. Simons Islands off the Georgia coast as a combination winter quarters and base for disrupting the coasting trade. Cockburn then seized St. Marys, penetrating nearly fifty miles upriver as his forces destroyed vessels and military stores.⁵⁴ The British then withdrew, and American naval forces reoccupied St. Marys. Trade quickly resumed, with a final British boat attack beaten off on February 22.⁵⁵

On the remainder of the southern coast, Ocracoke Inlet received only occasional visits from British patrollers, while Wilmington appears to have been left completely undisturbed during the last months of the war. It remained a base for privateers and their captures. Just one of the exploits of the *Kemp* illustrates the error in leaving any port open. The privateer *Kemp* sailed from Wilmington on November 29, 1814. It sighted a scattered convoy shortly after leaving. On December 4, the *Kemp* anchored again in Wilmington, accompanied by its prizes — two ships and two brigs. No British patroller had disturbed the *Kemp*'s entry or exit.⁵⁶

⁵³Campbell to Jones, November 11, 1814, DNA, RG45, 1814, Vol. 7, No. 2.

⁵⁴Pack, *Cockburn*, 270.

⁵⁵Tucker, *Gunboat Navy*, 171.

⁵⁶Mahan, *Sea Power*, 2:236-237.

The Gulf theater remained quiet until December, though a small force had attacked the fort at Mobile in September, losing a frigate for its trouble.⁵⁷ Cochrane concentrated his fleet at Ship Island on December 8, and captured the small flotilla blocking Lake Borgne six days later. The navy's portion of the attempt to capture New Orleans should have been complete at this point, but on January 15, 1815, Cochrane was needed to transport the remnants of the forces defeated by Andrew Jackson seven days earlier back to Bermuda.⁵⁸ On their way to Bermuda, Cochrane pounded the tiny but defiant fort holding Mobile Bay into submission.⁵⁹

On the northeastern coast, the *Peacock*, having taken fifteen prizes, entered the port of New York on October 29, 1814, without sighting any British warships.⁶⁰ On December 18, with no British in sight, the *Constitution* sailed from Boston, pursued by the frigates of the local squadron once the escape became known.⁶¹ The *President*, accompanied by brig carrying reserve supplies, sortied from New York on the evening of January 15, 1815. A British squadron cornered the large frigate, engaging in a running battle for several hours before *President* surrendered. The American brig escaped, hardly noticed in the scramble to capture one of the largest American warships then afloat.⁶² The

⁵⁷*Niles Weekly Register*, October 22, 1814.

⁵⁸Tucker, *Gunboat Navy*, 169-170; Pack, *Cockburn*, 269-271; *Niles Weekly Register*, February 13, 1815.

⁵⁹Benson J. Lossing, *Pictorial Fieldbook of the War of 1812* (New York, 1868); 1051.

⁶⁰Forester, *Age of Sail*, 217-218.

⁶¹Martin, *Fortunate Ship*, 191.

⁶²Captain John Hayes to Captain of the Fleet Henry Hotham, January 17, 1815, UKLPR, Adm. 1/505; Forester, *Age of Sail*, 260-264. The brig later joined the *Hornet* and the *Tom Bowline*.

President had the misfortune to be the first American warship captured while trying to enter or leave an American port since the brig *Nautilus* fell to Broke's squadron in the first weeks of the war.⁶³ It was also the last ship so captured. Even then, it served a duty to other vessels. With some blockaders chasing after the *Constitution* and others in disarray due to the fight with the *President*, the sloops *Hornet*, *Peacock*, and the brig *Tom Bowline* slipped out of New York on January 20. They were the last vessels of the U.S. Navy to sortie during the war.⁶⁴

Across the Atlantic, the last four months of the year had been less than pleasant for the Admiralty. Between the American government and private raiders, heavy losses continued in the shipping lanes. On September 9, Liverpool merchants and shipowners united to censor the Admiralty, claiming eight hundred vessels lost in the past two years, primarily at the hands of Americans. They requested that the Regent publicly intervene.⁶⁵ On September 30, Lloyds of London reported that two cruisers and several privateers had captured 108 prizes during the month.⁶⁶ When the Prussian government commissioned a statue of the late Queen Louise of Prussia, the British agreed to transport it from the stoneworks in Italy to France. The American privateer *Leo* interfered, capturing the ship and the statue, and creating a diplomatic incident.⁶⁷

⁶³*Chesapeake* never tried to leave port for a cruise - it intentionally engaged the *Shannon*.

⁶⁴Forester, *Age of Sail*, 275.

⁶⁵Coggeshall, *American Privateers*, 301-303.

⁶⁶*Niles Weekly Register*, October 22, 1814.

⁶⁷Forester, *Age of Sail*, 219.

Harried at sea by the Americans and at home by merchants and ship owners, the Admiralty and the Council found themselves increasingly boxed into a corner. The cost of the war was excessive, and the heavy taxes levied to support military operations increased the general resentment among the populace. Britain's erstwhile allies seemed to snicker at its inability to stop the Americans. The Bourbon monarchy (which Britain had restored) and several other European nations regularly allowed Americans the use of their ports. Far worse, the disordered European political situation threatened another round of war.⁶⁸ The failure of the campaign along the Canadian border actually amounted to little in the mountain of British problems, but it was enough. Representatives of Great Britain signed the Treaty of Ghent on December 24, 1814. A copy arrived in New York on February 11, 1815, and was ratified unchanged by the American Senate six days later, officially ending the war.⁶⁹

Notice traveled quickly to the blockading squadron, and the last great wooden wall fell apart, its constituent pieces sailing to new duties or to be placed in ordinary. Yet, "The Wooden Wall Complete" had never existed. Even at its strongest, it had failed to keep American vessels from the seas, and the legacy of that failure, measured in death and destruction, lasted months longer than the blockade.

The privateers returned home first, usually discovering the existence of peace after taking a final British merchantman. The *Constitution* captured the British sloop *Cyane*

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 224-225.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 274; Marcus, *Age of Nelson*, 483-484.

and *Levant* after a bloody action on February 20, picking up other prizes before discovering the news of peace. The *Hornet* savaged the brig *Penguin* on March 23, some seventeen days after the last British blockader received notification of peace. The *Hornet* then returned to the United States with the *Tom Bowline*. The sloop *Peacock*, last of the vessels that had run through that splintered wooden wall with such ease, sailed a route that led all the way to the coast of Java. There, on June 30, 1815, it punctuated the failure of the British blockade with one final broadside. Ironically, the last victim of the war carried the name of *Nautilus*.⁷⁰

⁷⁰Martin, *Fortunate Ship*, 195-207; Forester, *Age of Sail*, 275-278; Knox, *USN*, 129.

Chapter VI That Splintered Wall

There seems to have been little doubt among British historians as to which side claimed the laurels in the War of 1812. William James, writing in 1817, knew that his nation's victory rested on the invincible Royal Navy, though he used most of his paragraphs to justify its losses during the war. William Laird Clowes, shortly after the turn of the century, dodged the issue in his massive work by inviting Theodore Roosevelt to contribute the chapter on the 1812 conflict. Adroit politician that he was, Roosevelt countered the overwhelming Royal Navy with American victories on the Great Lakes and called it a draw. During the 1940s and 1950s, Gerald S. Graham published two works on the maritime struggles of the British Empire in North America. He doubted neither British victory nor the fact that the Royal Navy achieved that victory, despite its challenges in Europe. G. J. Marcus, publishing his volume on the Napoleonic Era in 1971, depicted the years 1793 to 1815 as a clean sweep for John Bull and the Nelsonian spirit.

For Graham and Marcus, success had depended on the strong British fleet and its blockade. Ironically, they, along with most twentieth-century historians of the era, used the research and interpretation of an American to support that conclusion. Their emphasis on the destruction of American commerce, the containment of the U.S. Navy within its ports, the downplaying of *guerre de course*, the disaffection of New England, and the drain of American specie reflected the work of an earlier historian — Alfred Thayer Mahan, who published *Sea Power In Its Relations To The War Of 1812* in 1905. Every

historian of the war since that date accepted, used, and copiously footnoted Mahan's interpretations.

They did so with reason. Aside from determining international naval strategy for at least five decades (and Mahan still has his adherents today), Mahan's research was thorough, while his interpretations flowed eloquently from the pen. He supported his views heavily with primary quotes and tables, a number of which have been used within these pages. Yet, Mahan's bias toward a strong blue water navy caused him to find a strength and effectiveness in the blockade of the United States that existed no more than his perceived "annihilation" of that country's commerce.

The preceding segments of this work outlined the reasons necessitating the blockade and the British progress toward completing their wooden wall. Within the framework of those facts, in stark contrast to the words of Mahan, the splintering of the blockade was obvious. A deeper analysis of American sorties, British losses, and American losses reveals the degree of weakness within the blockade.

Table 5 **U.S. Navy Sorties, 1812 - 1815**

	S 1812	F 1812	W 1812	S 1813	S 1813	F 1813
Attempts	11	11	3	6	2	2
Failures	1	0	1	3	0	0
	W 1813	S1814	S 1814	F 1814	W 1814	
Attempts	11	3	0	1	5	
Failures	4	0	0	0	1	

Sources: Compiled from primary and secondary sources listed in bibliography, exact dates of attempted sorties are noted in the text of Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

Table 5 tabulates successes and failures of attempted sorties by U.S. warships during each quarter of the war. A sortie is defined as one vessel attempting to leave port for the purpose of engaging British merchant shipping.

As explained in Chapter 2, the Admiralty never envisioned a military blockade that would result in total success, thus, the multi-layered defense system that included pursuit of enemy squadrons, strong convoy defenses, and roving patrols. Weather had proved the culprit whenever Napoleon's vessels escaped from their interdicted European harbors, and such was expected in the blockade of the United States. What had not been expected by the Admiralty were the sailings during good weather, and the ports consistently open to returning vessels.¹ As detailed in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, weather had less to do with the ability of the U.S. Navy to sortie, and to return seemingly as it pleased, than did British strategic and operational warship allocations, conflicting objectives, and even the actions of individual captains, such as Broke.

Taken alone, Table 5 does not indicate that the British blockade was ineffective. To the contrary, the *Constellation* never reached the open sea, while the frigate *Macedonian* and other vessels found their crews and armaments diverted to the Great Lakes theater due to the pressure of the British blockade. In fact, the number of successful American sorties decreased each year. The continuing inability of British

¹British blockaders failed to intercept and capture any of the American warships returning to port during the war.

blockaders to stop the U.S. Navy from engaging in a successful *guerre de course*, however, certainly suggests a less effective blockade than that discussed by Mahan.

American warships represented only a fraction of the potential danger to British shipping. Any evaluation of the military blockade must address its success in containing the private navy of the United States. As Congress authorized over 500 letters of marque during the war, and as over 250 vessels sailed at least once as privateers, it is impossible to collect sortie data with the accuracy reflected in Table 5.² Instead, analysis must rely on British losses. Even there, the skein of evidence is tremendously tangled.

Not all prizes were reported. Poor record-keeping and loss of ships' logs to enemy action or natural causes reduced the accuracy of accounting. In both the United States and England, no government agency collected the data as a whole, though insurance companies and newspapers kept their own tallies. The usual sources for British ships captured are the *Niles Weekly Register* and the official post-cruise reports of American naval officers. Niles claimed that American public and private navies took 2,500 prizes during the war, of which 750 were recaptured by the British.³ Working primarily from the named sources, George F. Emmons collected and tabulated capture lists

²Jerome R. Garitee, *The Republic's Private Navy: The American Privateering Business as Practiced by Baltimore During the War of 1812* (Middletown, Conn., 1977), xvi, gives "over 500" as the number, while Dudley W. Knox, *A History of the United States Navy* (New York, 1936), 95, offers 526 and Edgar S. Maclay, *A History of American Privateers* (New York, 1899), 506-507, uses 515. George Coggeshall, *History of the American Privateers and Letters of Marque During Our War with Great Britain in the Years 1812, 13, and 14* (New York, 1856), 460, states that only 253 were actually privateers, the remainder were letter of marque traders.

³*Niles Weekly Register*, January 6, 1816. Half a year earlier — June 3, 1815 — the estimate had been 3,000.

in 1853. Listing 257 captures by the U.S. Navy and 1,410 prizes taken by privateers, Emmons's work remains a standard statistical reference for period scholars.⁴

With an average loss of over one vessel per day to privateers, it is obvious that the blockade did not stop the private navy from leaving port, and if the estimate of only 750 recaptures was accurate, British blockaders also failed to keep prize vessels as well as privateers from returning to safe havens. Table 6 provides data on the disposition of prizes taken by American public and private ships during the war.

Table 6 American Prize Disposition, 1812-1815

	1812	1813	1814	1815	TTLs
New England	161	86	39	50	336
New York	23	7	5	5	40
Delaware	7	2	2	3	14
Chesapeake	22	0	0	0	22
Southern	32	40	52	28	152
Gulf	5	1	1	0	7
Foreign	3	36	37	2	78
Recaptured	3	6	1	8	18
Burned	40	141	150	82	413
Other	<u>68</u>	<u>116</u>	<u>92</u>	<u>88</u>	<u>364</u>
TTLs	364	435	379	266	1444

Note: The 1815 totals represent a partial year due to the cessation of hostilities in February. It must also be emphasized that these numbers do not include all prizes — they include only those for which a disposition or planned disposition was documented. As many as 1,100 to 1,500 captures may not have been accounted for in consulted sources.

Sources: Emmons's prize list forms the basis for this table. Dispositions missing from Emmons (most of them) were collected by a thorough search of primary and secondary sources, of which Coggeshall proved the most helpful. Listed prizes that lacked at least some indication of eventual disposition were excluded from the table. This accounts for the variance from Emmons's total of 1,667 prizes taken by the U.S. Navy and privateers.

⁴George F. Emmons, *Navy of the United States from the Commencement, in 1775, through 1853* (Washington, D.C., 1853), 56-200. Prizes taken on the Great Lakes as well as barges, launches, and fishing smacks are not included. Also remember, the total number of prizes taken exceeded Emmons's final figure — possibly by 100-300 vessels. Those captures simply could not be verified.

Each of the 1,444 prizes listed either sailed under a prize-master to a port in one of the designated areas, was identified as having been recaptured, or was burned or otherwise deliberately destroyed. The final category in the table includes cartels, ransomed vessels, or vessels stripped of valuables and allowed to continue. The category also includes vessels dispatched to "any American port," twenty-nine in 1812, fifty-six in 1813, thirty-seven in 1814, and sixty-three in 1815. Note that many vessels not listed as recaptured possibly suffered that fate, though records providing verification are currently unavailable.

The manner in which Americans disposed of prizes offers important clues as to the effectiveness and ineffectiveness of the blockade. New England and the South remained important receiving centers for prizes throughout the war. The former was not blockaded until mid-1814, and the latter received attention from the British only as warships could be spared through late August 1814. Even then, the port of Wilmington remained open. The sailing orders of prizes also indicate where privateers based. Logically, the captors wanted to send prizes to a port where their investors could monitor sales and sharing of proceeds.

After 1812, foreign ports assumed importance in prize disposition, as well as in refit and resupply of the private navy. With the abdication of Napoleon in mid-1814 results indicate that American privateers received support from neutrals and former English allies, as well as from the new French government and Napoleon's old allies. Most importantly, these ports could not be denied to the United States by blockade unless that blockade stopped privateers from leaving their home waters.

The increase in enemy vessels burned after 1812 was due primarily to the U.S. Navy. In 1813, recognizing that detailing prize crews weakened cruisers and subjected those crews to capture while returning home, Secretary of the Navy Jones issued orders forbidding the practice. Instead, he mandated the destruction of all prizes.⁵ Privateers also burned prizes — after stripping them of valuables — but less frequently than the regular navy. There was simply no profit in it, and profit financed the cruises even when it was not the total motivation for captain and crew. Privateers preferred to ransom a vessel, getting at least the promise of cash at a later date. The American navy even used ransom in 1812, though the illegal practice appears to have been quickly squashed by Hamilton, since no additional ransoming appears in official records. Illegal or not, privateers continued to let British vessels sail for promised money throughout the war.

The 1815 tallies represent the first quarter of the year. The large number of ships burned testifies to the effect of five American warships at sea, while the number of ships dispatched to ports as prizes indicates an even greater number of privateers at large, perhaps as many as two to three dozen. The Royal Navy, at its peak strength of the war, failed to maintain a military blockade capable of keeping American cruisers in port. There should be little wonder that its efforts had proven even less efficient before early 1815.

Failure to contain American raiders resulted in the loss of over \$40,000,000 in vessels and cargoes captured or destroyed in British commerce lanes, as well as

⁵Jones to Parker, December 8, 1813, William S. Dudley, *et al.*, ed., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* (Washington, D.C., 1992), 2:294-296; Jones to Master Commandant John O. Creighton, December 22, 1813, *Ibid.*, 2:296-297.

incalculable losses due to economic disruption.⁶ Insurance rates soared to their highest levels in twenty years of war, perishables rotted while awaiting convoy, and new markets faltered due to a lack of convoy lanes. Those results indicate that the Royal Navy's military blockade operated less effectively than historians have indicated.

Table 7 Halifax: Prizes by Vessel Type

	Ship	Sloop	Brig	Schooner	TTLs
1812	42	7	43	52	144
1813	45	71	79	144	339
1814	23	45	47	99	214
1815	<u>0</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>14</u>
TTLs	110	125	175	301	711

Source: Essex Institute, *American Vessels Captured by the British During the Revolution and the War of 1812* (Records of the Vice-Admiralty Court at Halifax, Nova Scotia) (Salem, Mass., 1911).

Table 8 Halifax: Court Rulings

	Condemned	Restored	Recapture	TTLs
1812	95	18	31	144
1813	252	45	42	339
1814	163	19	32	214
1815	<u>11</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>14</u>
TTL	521	82	108	711

Source: Essex Institute, *American Vessels Captured by the British During the Revolution and the War of 1812* (Records of the Vice-Admiralty Court at Halifax, Nova Scotia) (Salem, Mass., 1911).

As stated earlier, the capture lists of most admiralty courts are no longer available.

The single exception is Halifax, one of two home ports of the North American

⁶Garitce, *Private Navy*, 244.

Command.⁷ Table 7 lists the 711 captures adjudicated in Halifax by year of capture and vessel type. Table 8 breaks down the prizes by adjudication.

The success of British efforts to interdict American merchant shipping, privateers, and warships is exceedingly difficult to measure due to the lack of admiralty court records. Halifax and Bermuda, followed by the courts in the Caribbean, undoubtedly received the bulk of British captures. The 629 valid prizes adjudicated at Halifax seem to indicate that the blockade experienced great success in its interdiction efforts. Relatively few of the vessels, however, were the valuable high-tonnage ships — the key elements in the international carrying trade. Instead low-tonnage vessels indicative of the coasting and fishing fleets form the bulk of the prizes. The increase in captures of these smaller vessels in 1813 and 1814 reflected the campaigns in the Chesapeake Bay.

The Royal Navy did not operate alone off the coast of the United States. Privateers from England and Canada cruised American waters throughout the war, and accounted for many of the prizes taken into Halifax (Table 9). In war one usually takes any help offered, but the only welcome ever extended to those private cruisers by the Royal Navy came via impressment. In fact, British officers viewed them as competition for the few prizes available, and harassed those flying the “Red Jack” at every opportunity. Napier’s record of the relationship between Royal Navy and private navy spoke volumes:

⁷Essex Institute, *American Vessels Captured by the British During the Revolution and the War of 1812 (Records of the Vice-Admiralty Court at Halifax, Nova Scotia)* (Salem, Mass., 1911). All Halifax related tables are drawn exclusively from this work. Note that to configure completely British prize lists, up to a dozen admiralty court sites as well as numerous Admiralty letters would need to be found and analyzed, though just having Bermuda’s records would add tremendously to the evaluation.

“*Shannon*, privateer, again out. Must drive her off, as she spoils our cruising ground . . . Boarded and impressed five seamen from the *Rolla*, English privateer . . . Impressed two men from the *Lively*, English privateer.”⁸

Table 9 Halifax: Vessels by Party Capturing

	Royal Navy	Privateer	Other	TTLs
1812	119	24	1	144
1813	225	112	2	339
1814	153	59	2	214
1815	6	8	0	14
TTLs	503	203	5	711

Source: Essex Institute, *American Vessels Captured by the British During the Revolution and the War of 1812* (Records of the Vice-Admiralty Court at Halifax, Nova Scotia) (Salem, Mass., 1911).

Having found over 600 vessels taken as valid prizes by British blockaders and privateers, and with the knowledge that Halifax provided only a portion of the total captures during the war, it would appear that the British actually went some ways toward the “annihilation” of American commerce. An examination of imports and exports during the war, found in Table 10, seems even more conclusive.

Between 1812 and 1814, imports and exports suffered reductions of 84.4 percent and 84.2 percent respectively. Though the reduction in exports hindered the local economies of the United States, the loss of trade to a government almost totally reliant on duties for income proved nearly devastating. This appears to indicate that the blockade enjoyed great success against American commerce, and that the sentiments of Mahan rang

⁸Henry E. Napier, *New England Blockaded in 1814: The Journal of Henry Edward Napier, Lieutenant in H. M. S. Nymphé*, edited by Walter Muir Whitehill (Salem, Mass., 1939), 23, 35, 37.

true: "It seems fairly safe, however, to say that after the winter of 1812-13 American commerce dwindled very rapidly, till in 1814 it was practically annihilated."⁹

Table 10 **United States Exports and Imports, 1812-1815**
(in Millions of Dollars)

	Imports	Exports
1811	53	61
1812	77	39
1813	22	28
1814	13	7
1815	113	53
1816	147	82

Source: *American State Papers, Commerce and Navigation* (Washington, D. C., 1832), 1:889, 963, 993, 1022, and 2:20, 52. Note that annual records run from October 1 through September 30 of the following year.

As an alternative to Mahan's rhetoric, consider the nature of American maritime strategy on the eve of war. That strategy was simplistic in the extreme. Knowing that it was impossible to avoid the destruction of the American merchant marine by the superior British navy if it remained at sea, President Madison issued the pre-war embargo and called upon all merchant vessels to hurry home or shelter in a neutral port until hostilities ended. American naval forces sailed as squadrons to distract the Royal Navy and cover the homeward bound merchant vessels. In other words, *international commerce was voluntarily surrendered for the duration of the war*. In that case, to paraphrase Mahan, it seems fairly safe to say that before the winter of 1812-13 American commerce dwindled rapidly as merchant ships found safe havens, till in 1813 and 1814 the only commerce that continued was that allowed by British licenses. This alternative interpretation does not

⁹Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Sea Power In Its Relations To The War Of 1812*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1905), 2: 21.

deny the effectiveness of the British blockade, or at least American fear of the hazards of a British controlled Atlantic basin, in halting the trans-oceanic trade of the United States. It does, however, clearly distinguish between “halted” and “annihilated” commerce.

The commercial blockade was designed to weaken the American economy. Many Americans experienced inconvenience and frustration due to the slow inland transportation that replaced interrupted coastal traffic, but the nation was self-sufficient, and a self-sufficient economy tends to resist disruption. If not disrupted, the economy was certainly discomfited, and the literate wealthy who speculated in shipping and export provided the records that witnessed to their discomfort. Even the government suffered from shortages of funds, amassing a large public debt over the course of the war.

Table 11 **United States Merchant Tonnage (in Thousands of Tons)**

	Registered	Duties	Entered	Duties	Fishing	Duties
1811	768.8	948.4	420.4	321.9	43.3	37.6
1812	760.6	668.0	478.0	338.2	31.4	27.8
1813	674.8	237.7	471.1	252.4	20.7	18.5
1814	674.6	59.8	466.2	189.7	18.4	16.5
1815	854.3	707.0	475.7	374.8	38.2	33.2
1816	800.8	877.5	522.2	414.6	49.3	48.1

Source: American State Papers, Commerce and Navigation (Washington, D. C., 1832), 1: 959, 962, 998, 1001, 1018, 1021, and 2:13, 14, 38, 39, 62, 63. Data tabulated as of December 31.

Such problems, however, cannot be blamed entirely on the economic blockade. They arose because the government of the United States failed to achieve its short, victorious war as originally planned. By December 1812, it was clear to Madison that the assault on Canada, the only leverage against Britain available to the United States, had failed. Within three months, Congress had appointed peace commissioners to seek an end

to a conflict suddenly turned hopeless. Meanwhile, the original maritime strategy changed to a *guerre de course* for the navy while making no official efforts to reestablish international commerce.

“Annihilation” implies utter destruction. Did the British blockade destroy American carrying capacity? Table 11 displays the status of American commercial tonnage during the war years.

“Registered” tonnage represents tonnage available for international trade, “Entered” tonnage applies to tonnage available for the coasting trade, while “Fishing” is self-explanatory. The “Duties” columns indicate the amount of available tonnage actually engaged in activity (if a registered ship sailed from an American port twice in one year, it paid duties twice, which explains the apparent aberrations in 1811 and 1816). Registered tonnage suffered a loss of some 85,800 tons in the first months of the war, the equivalent of 150 to 200 large vessels. Despite the sailing of over 295,000 tons during 1813 and 1814, additional losses proved negligible, indicative of involvement in the licensed trade. Losses to the coasting trade remained small throughout the war, only 11,800 tons, or perhaps 200 vessels of 50 to 100 tons each. These small losses occurred despite the fact that 70.7 percent in 1812, 53.6 percent in 1813, and 40.7 percent in 1814 of available tonnage operated.¹⁰ The fishing fleet was a different matter entirely. Between 1812 and

¹⁰The impact of the 1813-14 embargo on coasting should be kept in mind; without it, well over 50% of tonnage would have operated in 1814.

1814, it lost 13,000 tons, or 41.4 percent of its strength.¹¹ This represented literally hundreds of small to medium tonnage vessels taken or destroyed by the British, and apparently constituted the bulk of British prizes.

As the numbers illustrate, the commerce carriers of the United States did not suffer annihilation at British hands. Though temporarily, and to some degree voluntarily, isolated from their normal markets, they rebounded in 1815 to volumes of trade approaching those of 1811. Even the fishing fleet had recovered, with interest, by 1816. Not only does Table 11 reveal the lack of damage to the American merchant marine, it also reveals the volume of trade that continued unfettered, if not unhindered, throughout the war.

Again, this does not indicate that the British economic blockade was completely ineffective. American commerce was tremendously reduced, but far from “practically annihilated.” Losses to the merchant marine proved minimal, allowing a vigorous return in 1815 to the commercial lanes from which it had been voluntarily withdrawn in 1812. The fact that 40.7 percent of American coasting tonnage operated in 1814 — and did so with minimal losses — seems somewhat at odds with the traditional view of the tight blockade of the American coast. Such an overpowering blockade as that reflected in the interpretations of past historians should have annihilated the American coasting fleet, or at

¹¹Actual losses most likely slightly exceeded the numbers arrived at due to purchase and conversion of prizes to trade as well as newly built vessels entering the lanes. The bulk of building activities during the war, however, centered on naval and privateer vessels.

least kept the majority of its tonnage locked in port. That the British blockaders did not do so tends to indicate an effectiveness somewhat less than that currently accepted.

Past historians introduced two other aspects of the war that are related to the effectiveness of the blockade. The first was the question of New England and its special treatment by the British. The second concerned the drain of specie out of sections of the United States, and out of the United States in general. Both situations appear to have been overstated, if not purely fallacious.

The British Council decided in 1812 that the coasts of New England should not be placed under commercial blockade. Partly, this was to facilitate provision and grain shipments to the Peninsula, the Maritime provinces of Canada, and the Caribbean. Mainly, the British hoped that the apparent sentiments behind the split in Congress over the declaration of war would result in the withdrawal of New England from the Union. The Council even ordered Warren to make a separate peace if possible. That many New Englanders resented the war was obvious. Amos A. Evans, surgeon of the *Constitution*, recorded the anti-war attitude of Bostonians in his journal, while anti-Madison rhetoric abounded in many area newspapers.¹² Yet other New England hands took 142 privateers and letter of marque traders to sea, and though they sailed for personal profit — neither the first nor last to profit from war — they performed a priceless service for their country.¹³ It is difficult to imagine the crews, or their families, or their investors willingly

¹²William D. Sawtell, ed., *Journal Kept Onboard the Frigate Constitution, 1812 by Amos A. Evans, Surgeon, U.S.N.* (Concord, Mass., 1967), 160-162, 381, 385.

¹³Maclay, *Privateers*, 506-507.

abandoning the Union. It is also difficult to imagine that sentiment in the citizens of Eastport, who in early 1813 sheltered an American prize from an irate British frigate, not only refusing to surrender it, but exchanging cannon fire with the frigate to prevent its recapture.¹⁴ Similarly, when given the option to swear allegiance to King George or leave, fully 25 percent of the population in occupied Maine chose to leave.¹⁵ Consider their dilemma closely: Rather than abandon their country, they gave up all they possessed to the British and walked south. How many of us would do the same?

Graham wrote: "In the case of New England it can be safely affirmed that the neutrality of this wealthy ship-building area saved British North America."¹⁶ There is, however, tremendous difficulty in understanding his perception of a region that supported numerous privateers, safely harbored American naval assets, and provided monetary support to the federal government as "neutral."¹⁷ Perhaps the efforts of the Hartford Convention, dying unheralded with war's end, prompted the statement. Even then, the convention did not produce a document of secession, only proposals for constitutional change to strengthen defense and increase the power of individual states.¹⁸

¹⁴Coggeshall, *American Privateers*, 154.

¹⁵Charles J. Ingersoll, *History of the Second War Between the United States of America and Great Britain, Declared by Congress the 18th of June, 1812, and Concluded by Peace the 15th of February, 1815* (Philadelphia, 1852); 116.

¹⁶Gerald S. Graham, *Empire of the North Atlantic: The Maritime Struggle for North America* (Toronto, 1950), 248.

¹⁷*American State Papers, Finance* (Washington, D.C., 1832), 1:661. List of banks participating in war loan, May 2, 1814.

¹⁸Samuel E. Morison, Frederick Merk, and Frank Freidel, *Dissent in Three American Wars* (Cambridge, Mass., 1970), 1-31. Morison addresses the difference between the reality of New England dissent and popular perceptions of the section as "neutral" and even "rebellious."

The best contemporary assessment of New Englanders came from the hand of Napier: "Federalists pretend to be friendly to the English. They hate the war on their own account, hate the war because it prevents their making money, and like the English as a spendthrift loves an old rich wife; the sooner we are gone the better."¹⁹ New England not only lacked neutrality, except that envisioned by the British government, it remained the heart of American maritime activity throughout the war. By failing to blockade New England from the start of the war, Great Britain created a haven for privateers and American warships, as well as a source of revenue for the United States, that lasted into 1814.

Specie, or silver and gold coinage, constituted an important measure of wealth in the early nineteenth century. A measure of the success of the blockade frequently observed by historians has been the drain of specie from the southern and middle regions of the United States to New England, and thence to Canada, or directly from the south via Amelia Island.²⁰ Unfortunately, all claims lacked provenance or even logical support, quite probably because no drain of specie existed. The possibility of discovering the exact transactions that precipitated a projected drain of specie almost two hundred years ago remains remote, if not impossible, but some readily available data and the application of knowledge of period logistics offer a refutation to the claims of historians.

¹⁹Napier, *Journal*, 23.

²⁰Historians addressing the drain of specie include Henry Adams, Robert G. Albion, Francis Beirne, A. L. Burt, Gerald S. Graham, Donald R. Hickey, Dudley Knox, Alfred T. Mahan, Albert Marrin, and Patrick C. T. White. The list is not necessarily inclusive.

Specie entered the United States by two means, the bulk of it entering through trade and the remainder via prizes, both of which an effective blockade should have stopped. Table 10 noted the export value of trade leaving the United States during the war, an apparent national income of \$71,000,000 plus or minus foreign market value. Of this, \$42,200,000 represented trade with the Peninsula, a portion of the licensed trade. Wellington wrote in 1813: "The exporters of specie, to the great distress of the army and the ruin of the country, are the American merchants . . . these merchants cannot venture to take in payment bills upon England . . . they must continue therefore to export specie from Portugal."²¹ Such would have been the case in virtually all licensed transactions, as Britain forbade licensees to return to the United States with non-British goods, while the Non-Importation law forbade their returning with British goods. The result certainly included a specie drain — only *from* Great Britain *into* the United States, primarily through the open door of New England. Trade through Amelia Island operated as any normal market, other than during the embargo. Americans sold cotton, then purchased foreign goods — often British imports — legally, as Spain controlled the island and the British dared not interdict it nor the neutrals using it. This, the only real market open to the United States, not only accounted for the tremendous coasting trade often escorted by vessels at St. Marys, but brought specie into the South due to the high value of cotton driven by the shortage in England.

²¹As quoted in C. S. Forester, *The Age of Fighting Sail* (Sandwich, Mass., 1956), 84.

As for the Canadian border, there is little doubt that American provisions fed the British forces in Canada. It is illogical, however, to think that Americans traded most of their agricultural products for British goods — how could they have transported them through the extensive northern forests to viable markets? The coasts stood closed to coasting and the northern woods lacked even rudimentary roads. Donald Hickey related the story of a Maine husbandman driving his cattle to the Canadian border. Prevented by law from crossing with them, he waited while a Canadian compatriot used a basket of corn to lure them across the border. The only thing that Hickey omitted was the bag of silver that magically fell onto American soil as the cattle ambled north.²² Though the trade balance may have run against the United States in certain locales, on the whole tremendous quantities of specie entered the country and — as no historian has yet provided documentation to prove differently — the bulk of it apparently remained there.

Prizes, often as part of their cargo, brought large quantities of specie into the country. Investors earned millions of dollars in profits from prize sales. In Baltimore, twenty-six of the major investors realized profits of over \$200,000 each, while numerous minor investors among less wealthy citizens also benefited.²³ It was the same up and down the seaboard. Rather than draining specie, licensing and the failures of the blockade had brought specie into the United States.

²²Donald R. Hickey, "American Trade Restrictions during the War of 1812," *Journal of American History*, 68 (Dec 1981), 535.

²³Garitee, *Private Navy*, 240.

From 1812 through early 1815, Britain attempted to enclose the coasts of the United States in a wooden wall. That wall's splintered nature should now be obvious. The military blockade had failed to contain the American public and private navies, resulting in an estimated loss of seventy-eight British merchantmen per month of the war. Even during the second half of the long Anglo-French conflict, 1803-1814, French naval resources had averaged fewer than forty captures per month.²⁴ And when the first two months of 1815 are considered, average British losses of over one hundred vessels per month seem to indicate that American efforts had not yet peaked. Nor had the economic blockade been totally successful, with Great Britain actually subsidizing a portion of the American merchant marine through most of the war via the licensed trade, while leaving New England uninterdicted until the last ten months of the war.

The final measure of the effectiveness of the blockade is found in the action of the British government. That the same men who refused the mediation of the Russian tsar in early 1813 in their desire to punish America signed a treaty in which they gained nothing except an end to the war in December of 1814 speaks volumes. The only question that remains — the same question that British citizens asked in 1814 — is why did the Royal Navy fail to blockade America effectively, and in so doing fail to protect its own commerce and reputation? That failure rested with the Admiralty and fell into five categories — force allocation, extent of blockade, command conflict, confusion of objectives, and command selection.

²⁴G. J. Marcus, *The Age of Nelson: The Royal Navy, 1793-1815* (New York, 1971), 382.

Despite warnings of imminent war, the Admiralty failed to take steps reallocating forces to the North American command. Though a question of naval resources, the decision not to allocate additional vessels to Halifax also represented a choice of priorities, and the threat potential of Napoleon far outweighed that of Madison. With the declaration of war, the Admiralty's solution to the problem of ship availability, combining the Jamaica, Leeward Islands, and Halifax stations offered no succor to its hard-pressed commander in Halifax, despite the appearance on ship lists of an adequate blockading force in the theater of war. This disparity between the vision of the Admiralty, the needs of the station admiral, and the reality of vessels actually on blockade remained a weakness throughout the war, as illustrated in Table 12.

Table 12 **British Ship Availability, Halifax, 1812-1815**

	Admiralty	On Station	On Blockade
July, 1812	23	7	0
February, 1813	97	28	6
July, 1813	112	52	11
March, 1814	58	39	18
August, 1814	72	60	25
January, 1815	85	73	28

Sources: Ships in Sea Pay, Admiralty Office, 1 July 1812, D, UKLPR, Adm. 8; Croker to Warren, February 10, 1813, William S. Dudley, *et al.*, ed., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* (Washington, D.C., 1992), 2:16-19; Ships in Sea Pay, July 1, 1813, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 2:168-178; Vice-Admiral Sir Alexander Cochrane, R. N., to Secretary of the Admiralty John W. Croker, 8th March 1814, UKLPR, Adm. 1/505. August 1814 and January 1815 Admiralty numbers are estimates. "On Station" and "On Blockade" are calculated from a comparative search of the primary and secondary sources cited in this study.

The dates in Table 12 were derived from primary source documents listing the ship strength used by the Admiralty and the strength actually available to the admiral on station. Blockade strength was a matter of tallying the average number of documented

blockaders operating off the coast. As can be seen, the numbers differ tremendously, and forces that appeared more than adequate to the Admiralty sitting at table in London dwindled to a minuscule coverage of the American coast.

Except for 1813, when most of the “missing” vessels resided in the Caribbean, the difference in “Admiralty” and “On Station” numbers included vessels in transit to or from the command, serving as convoy escorts, undergoing long term refits, or lost and not yet reported. “On Station” ships unavailable for blockade included those on anti-privateer patrols, a varying amount on short term refit before relieving blockaders, vessels carrying dispatches, and warships designated for offensive actions. As Table 12 reveals, regardless of the numbers quoted by the Admiralty, the amount of force allocated to the North American command never proved adequate for the blockade.

The beginning of the military blockade, meant to deny, within limits, the sea-lanes to the U.S. Navy, can be traced to documents preceding the declaration of war, and remained a continuing subject in Admiralty missives throughout the war’s duration. Its failure tied directly to ship availability, as well as to timing. If early military blockades of major American ports had been established, then the swarms of privateers would have been reduced, allowing the additional British ships committed to protect convoys and patrol sea-lanes to have been used instead to blockade minor ports, or to patrol American coastlines. The failure to anticipate the force allocations needed to establish and to maintain the blockade proved critical to its ultimate effectiveness.

The economic blockade, declared in four separate stages, remained less than fully efficient throughout the war; though if the war had continued, 1815 might have been a different story. By February of that year, the New England coast had been closed to neutrals for several months, and Cockburn had demonstrated that Amelia Island could be isolated by the seizure of St. Marys. As implemented through 1814, however, the economic blockade, working around licensing and Spain's Amelia Island, had proven unable to force the United States to sue for peace under any terms.

The tendency to give conflicting orders and to misdirect and verbally abuse subordinates proved one of the Admiralty's most devastating faults, especially in the first eighteen months of the war. From the initial orders that urged Warren to destroy the enemy while not endangering peace negotiations, through the final decision in early 1814 to split the North American command as Warren had requested months earlier, the Admiralty weakened the blockading effort by sowing confusion and despair in its chosen commander's mind. That confusion of objectives led to the Chesapeake Bay campaign of 1813, an operation that removed valuable vessels from the blockade while achieving little.

The last full year of the war brought a change in strategic objectives along the Atlantic seaboard. The Admiralty intended the massive raids in the Chesapeake and the campaigns aimed at Maine as diversions, distracting American troops from reinforcing against the British invasion in the Great Lakes theater and simultaneously weakening the American will to resist. The New Orleans expedition was intended to capture and hold the mouth of the Mississippi, either permanently or as a bargaining chip at the peace

conference. Nonetheless, warships assigned to these campaigns lessened the number of vessels available for the military blockade, and the concentration of force for the latter operation certainly played a part in the large number of prizes taken by the Americans in early 1815.

Aside from Sawyer, whom fate unkindly placed at the cruel point of decision in the first three months of the war, the Admiralty selected only two officers to control the North American command during the war. Admiral Sir John Borlase Warren, a superb officer, earned an undeserved reputation during his time in command. Thrown into the fire of conflict with mixed orders, privateers running freely, too few ships locally to patrol the coast (much less blockade it), and numerous ships in the Caribbean that the Admiralty refused to let him control, he nonetheless brought order out of chaos, installed a weak blockade, and even continued to work toward peace negotiations. The Admiralty ridiculed his attempts to acquire additional ships and demanded the destruction of the U.S. Navy with the forces at his disposal. Warren attempted to do just that in the Chesapeake. On March 13, 1814, a young British officer, distraught because his powerful frigate had been anchored in port for four months awaiting repairs while numerous brigs and schooners refitted ahead of it, mused on Warren's reasons for such commands:

The conduct of Sir John Warren, since he has commanded on this station, has been so very inexplicable that *his* reasons must be *very secret* indeed, as there is not a person able to form a conjecture on the subject; so secret are these reasons, that some people even begin to fancy that he never had any.²⁵

²⁵Napier, *Journal*, 3.

Like many authors have done since, Napier criticized the apparent indecision of Warren; and like them, he was wrong. In this case, the smaller vessels refitted faster and served an immediate need on the convoy lanes, while the frigate, unable to stand alone against the larger Americans, could wait. This was typical of Warren's decision-making skills, skills that with proper support from the Admiralty could have built a wooden wall around the United States.

On the surface, Vice Admiral Sir Alexander F. I. Cochrane appeared as a poor choice on the Admiralty's part to command the blockade. His hatred for Americans distracted him from the mundane duty of blockading. That may, however, have been exactly the type of commander Lord Melville felt he needed in North America, one who could and would take the war home to the American people, forcing them to the treaty table on bended knees. Cochrane personally selected the targets for the Chesapeake and Mississippi campaigns of 1814. As fate dictated, he accomplished little except the weakening of the blockade, despite major reinforcement of his forces.

Though primary accountability for the splintered wall rests with the Admiralty, other sources certainly contributed. The attitude of officers in the Royal Navy, especially in the scramble for prize money, contributed its share to failure. The aura of invincibility surrounding the Royal Navy, shattered in three brief frigate actions and mocked by the seemingly unstoppable cuts of American privateers and cruisers alike, played its part. More important than either, however, was the war with France. The continuation of that conflict necessitated the licensing policy, thereby contributing to keeping the ports of New

England open. The fear of a French breakout from one of the blockaded Channel ports loomed large in the mind of the Admiralty and Warren, impacting command structure and force allocation. The need for a Spanish ally negated any thought of taking action against Amelia Island, and the overall alliance situation made dealing with any neutral shipping tricky, indeed. The ports of France and its allies greatly extended the range of American raiders operating off Europe, highlighting the critical need for a successful military blockade. Finally, it was the ending of the war with France, or rather the chaos following that ending, that cleared a path to the Treaty of Ghent.

With all data presented and all discussion complete, exactly how does the British blockade of the United States rate against the criteria established in Chapter 2?

1. The military blockade, as part of a three-tiered defensive system, holds friendly merchant marine losses to *guerre de course* to an acceptable level. Methods of measure include comparative losses, varying insurance rates, economic dislocation, and public outrage.

Average monthly losses to American raiders during the War of 1812 were nearly twice that experienced in the last half of Britain's war against France. Insurance rates on the Atlantic routes and in British home waters jumped to their highest levels in twenty years of near continuous war due to American depredations.²⁶ Raiders caused over \$40,000,000 in direct losses, and the indirect losses due to increasingly strict convoy routings and the inevitable delays accompanying convoys are incalculable, but certainly significant. The petitions of angry merchants reached the highest levels of the government

²⁶Marcus, *Age of Nelson*, 473. Insurance rates doubled due to American raiders.

as the aura of British naval invincibility shattered. Little doubt can exist that the blockade was less than effective in this category of measurement.

2. The greater the duration of the military blockade, the less effective the enemy navy becomes as losses experienced by raiders, inability to gain the sea, and the debilitating effects of prolonged, forced stays in port weaken it. This is best measured by the number of enemy vessels at sea across the duration of the blockade, and by the performance of those vessels when in action.

The United States maintained raiders at sea throughout the conflict. American vessels usually won in equal combats. The primary mission of those raiders, however, was to destroy enemy merchant ships while, if possible, avoiding warships. Neither the overall quantity nor the quality of American vessels and crews seem to have deteriorated over the course of the war. Again, the British blockade seems to rate as less than effective.

3. The ability of the enemy navy to interfere with the tactical options of the military blockade is impaired or eliminated. The ability of the blockading forces to conduct successful raids, and the impact of those raids on the enemy, measures degree of success.

Without a doubt the British blockaders gained the tactical initiative in early 1813. They raided the coast of the United States almost at will for the remainder of the war. Public opinion, as recorded in the newspapers of the era, alternated between vitriolic commentary on the British and pleas for Madison to do something to stop the outrages. Madison, however, seemed less moved by the blockade than by strategic considerations. His willingness to accept Russian mediation in March 1813 seems tied to the failed American offensive along the Canadian border and the knowledge of Napoleon's defeat in Russia. The acceptance of the British offer to begin direct peace negotiations in early 1814 came immediately after the news of Leipzig. Madison's final decision to drop his

demands at Ghent and accept a return to the *status quo* came immediately after the notification of Napoleon's abdication. Though the overall impact of the raids on the outcome of the war seems somewhat questionable, the blockaders certainly rated very effective in maintaining the tactical initiative.

4. The enemy's coasting trade is virtually eliminated or severely retarded by the military blockade. Measures include percent of normal trade occurring, reduction of enemy tonnage, diversion of potential cargoes to land transport, and public outrage.

The coasting trade continued throughout the war. If Madison had not declared an embargo in late 1813, coasting tonnage would have exceeded 50 percent of its pre-war rate in 1814, while loss of tonnage during the war was slight (Table 11). A certain amount of potential cargo was diverted to land transport during the war, especially if the cargo needed to transit past the Virginia Capes, and newspapers often voiced public concerns at the interference with local shipping. All considered, the lack of damage to and continued strength of the coasting trade certainly indicate a less than effective blockade.

5. The enemy merchant marine is held in port or destroyed by the military blockade. Measures are percent of normal exports, tonnage lost, varying insurance rates, and public outrage.

The bulk of the American merchant marine spent the war in port, though, as with the coasting trade, tonnage lost was quite minor (Table 11). If "Madison's nightcaps" did not cry outrage in a loud enough voice, letters and newspapers surely did.²⁷ The British

²⁷Merchant vessels anchored to await the end of the war inverted baskets over their mastheads to protect them from exposure. Citizens termed these devices "Madison's Nightcaps," in honor of the man they deemed responsible for the war.

effectively blockaded America's carrying fleet, but the effectiveness should be qualified by the licensing system that kept part of those ships operating through 1814.

6. A successful commercial blockade stops all neutral trade with the enemy. Measures of success include the elimination of imports and exports carried in neutral hulls.

Most neutral trade was stopped by mid-1814, and all by early 1815. The level of success was reduced by the decision to leave New England outside the economic blockade for most of the war, as well as by the failure to disrupt the Amelia Island trade flowing through St. Marys until the end of the war. Though this portion of the blockade was effective overall, it could have achieved greater success.

7. Successful military and economic blockades cause visible dislocation to an enemy's economic, political, and even social infrastructures. This will be readily apparent at the end of the conflict, and the degree of blockade efficiency can be roughly measured by societal change and the length of time the enemy nation takes to recover from its maritime losses.

As Tables 10 and 11 illustrate, the United States' merchant marine recovered immediately from the war. Indeed, the war impacted America across the spectrum, but those impacts were invariably positive. Both the immediate leap into the market revolution and the beginning of the Era of Good Feelings derived from the War of 1812. If the blockade's "overwhelming effectiveness" outlived the minute of its disbanding, I am hard-pressed to find its negative residue.

The blockade of the United States was never the behemoth portrayed by Mahan. In truth, by the measures of that day it proved less than fully effective when compared to

the blockade of France, and it certainly placed Britain in a more precarious seat at Ghent's bargaining table than the chair that country enjoyed in Paris and, later, in Vienna.

It is debatable whether anyone won the War of 1812; that the British did not win the war is a fitting final comment on the effectiveness of the blockade. The Treaty of Ghent addressed none of the issues originally set forth by James Madison; instead, it returned the belligerents to the *status quo ante-bellum*. That those issues disappeared of their own accord as time ran its course has projected a sense of triviality and unimportance on the war, until what remains in common knowledge is Washington burning, Andrew Jackson winning at New Orleans, and the *Constitution*. That splintered British wall, misinterpreted by historians until it became the overwhelming force it never was, lies forgotten.

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