

***On June 1, 1812, President James Madison delivered this message to the U.S. Congress, an excerpt of which is presented below, asking for a declaration of war against Great Britain. Congress complied on June 18, thus initiating the War of 1812.***

British cruisers [navy ships] have been in the continued practice of violating the American flag on the great highway of nations, and of seizing and carrying off persons sailing under it, not in the exercise of a belligerent [aggressive] right founded on the law of nations against an enemy, but of a municipal [internal] prerogative [authority] over British subjects [citizens]. British jurisdiction [supervision] is thus extended to neutral vessels...

The practice . . . is so far from affecting British subjects alone that, under the pretext [excuse] of searching for these, thousands of American citizens, under the safeguard of public law and of their national flag, have been torn from their country and from everything dear to them; have been dragged on board ships of war of a foreign nation and exposed, under the severities of their discipline, to be exiled to the most distant and deadly climes [conditions], to risk their lives in the battles of their oppressors [bullies], and to be the melancholy [depressed] instruments of taking away those of their own brethren [relatives]...

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

Under pretended blockades, without the presence of an adequate [sufficient] force and sometimes without the practicability [possibility] of applying one, our commerce [trade] has been plundered in every sea, the great staples [products] of our country have been cut off from their legitimate [reasonable] markets, and a destructive blow aimed at our agricultural and maritime [oceangoing] interests...

Not content with these occasional expedients [resources] for laying waste our neutral trade, the Cabinet of Britain resorted at length to the sweeping system of blockades, under the name of Orders in Council, which has been molded and managed as might best suit its political views, its commercial jealousies, or the avidity [enthusiasm] of British cruisers...

It has become, indeed, sufficiently certain that the commerce of the United States is to be sacrificed, not as interfering with the belligerent rights of Great Britain; not as supplying the wants of her enemies, which she herself supplies; but as interfering with the monopoly [complete ownership] which she covets [desires strongly] for her own commerce and navigation...

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