



U.S. HISTORY

The War of 1812 *Henry Clay's Letter*

Synopsis:

The War of 1812 was considered America's Second Revolutionary War - it established us as a firm, new nation and definitively convinced Great Britain that we were here to stay. But many then (and even today) wondered if we should have declared war - or tried a more peaceful approach. Those seeking a more reserved approach were known as the *Doves*. The others, demanding action and military aggression to convince the English to respect our national sovereignty, were known as *War Hawks*.

Henry Clay from Kentucky was one of the most significant of these *War Hawks*. As Speaker of the House, Clay pushed his war agenda and continually tried to express the need for going to war. The following is a letter he wrote in support of this armed conflict.

The public attention has been drawn to the approaching arrival of the Hornet, as the period when the measures of our government would take a decisive character, or rather their final cast. We are among those who have attached to this event a high degree of importance, and have therefore looked to it with the utmost solicitude.

But if the reports which we now hear are true, that with England all hope of honorable accommodation is at an end, and that with France our negotiations are in a fowardness encouraging expectations of a favorable result, where is the motive for longer delay? The final step ought to be taken; and that step is WAR. By what course of measures we have reached the present crisis, is not now a question for freemen and patriots to discuss. It exists; and it is by open and manly war only that we can get through it with honor and advantage to the country. Our wrongs have been great; our cause is just; and if we are decided and firm, success is inevitable.

Let war therefore be forthwith proclaimed against England. With her there can be no motive for delay. Any further discussion, any new attempt at negotiation, would be as fruitless as it would be dishonorable. With France we shall still be at liberty to pursue the course which circumstances may require. The advance she has already made by the repeal of her decrees; the manner of its reception by our government; and the prospect which exists of an amicable accommodation, entitle her to this preference. If she acquits herself to the just claims of the United States, we shall have good cause to applaud our conduct in it, and if she fails we shall always be in time to place her on the ground of her adversary. And on that ground, in that event, it is hoped she will be placed.

But it is said that we are not prepared for war, and ought therefore not to declare it. This is an idle objection, which can have weight with the timid and pusillanimous only. The fact is otherwise. Our preparations are adequate to every essential object. Do we apprehend danger to ourselves? From what quarter will it assail us? From England, and by invasion? The idea is too absurd to merit a moment's consideration. Where are her troops? But lately, she dreaded an invasion of her own dominions, from her powerful and menacing neighbor. That danger, it is true, has

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diminished, but it has not entirely, and forever, disappeared. A gallant effort, which called forth the whole energies of the nation, has put it at a distance, but still it is one of those sparks which peer above the horizon, & excite alarm even in those least liable to it. The war in the peninsula, which lingers, requires strong armies to support it. She maintains an army in Sicily; another in India; and a strong force in Ireland, and along her own coast and in the West Indies. Can any one believe, that, under such circumstances, the British government could be so infatuated, or rather mad, as to send troops here for the purpose of invasion? The experience and the fortune of our revolution, when we were comparatively in an infant state, have doubtless taught her an useful lesson which cannot have been forgotten. Since that period our population has increased three-fold, whilst her's has remained almost stationary. The condition of the civilized world, too, has changed. Although Great Britain has nothing to fear, as to her independence, and her military operations are extensive and distant, the contest is evidently maintained by her rather for safety than for conquest. Have we cause to dread an attack from her neighboring provinces? That apprehension is still more groundless. Seven or eight millions of people have nothing to dread from 300,000. From the moment that war is declared, the British colonies will be put on the defensive, and soon after we get in motion must sink under the pressure. Little predatory incursions on our frontier will not be encouraged by those who know that we can retort them ten-fold, and pursue and punish the authors, retire where they may, if they remain in this hemisphere. Nor is any serious danger to be apprehended from their savage allies. Our frontiers may be easily protected against them. The colonial governments, aware of our superiority, and of the certainty of their subjugation in case of war, will feel their responsibility for the conduct of the Indian tribes, and keep them in order. But should the war lately terminated be renewed, the struggle will be short. Numberless expeditions from different quarters may be led forth against them. A single campaign would drive these unfortunate people into the most distant and desert wilds.

But our coast and seaport towns are exposed and may be annoyed. Even this danger, which exists in a certain degree, has been much exaggerated. No land force can be brought to bear against them, because Great Britain has none to spare for such a service; and without a land force, no great impression can be made. Ships of war cannot approach near the coast, except at the entrance of our great bays and rivers. They cannot annoy the sea coast generally by their cannon; and if detachments of marines should be sent on shore, they may be repelled by the militia where they land. It is, however, unusual for incursions to be made on land from ships of war by sailors or marines. The law of nations forbids, and humanity revolts, at the idea of mere wanton desolation; and in that light only can such incursions be viewed. In the present war between Great Britain and France, which has been prosecuted with so much violence and animosity, no example of this kind, on either side is recollected. In our revolutionary war, in which the object of Great Britain was conquest, no great injury was sustained in this mode. Some of our towns, it is admitted, may be exposed to danger from ships of war, but with suitable precautions it will soon vanish. No ship of war can stand long before a good battery well manned and well supplied with heavy artillery. An attack by ships of war only, on any of our towns, could have no object but that of distressing the inhabitants; and if those towns are put in such a state of defence, as to enable them to repel the attack, as all of them are, or soon may be, it is not probable that the experiment would be made, or, if once made, that it would be repeated. The importance of the protection of our seaport towns is sensibly felt. It is a subject which claims the particular attention of the government, and that attention has doubtless been already bestowed on it.

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The great question on which the United States have to decide, is, whether they will relinquish the ground which they now hold, or maintain it with the firmness and vigor becoming freemen. That the sense of the nation favors the latter course, is proved by a series of important and solemn facts, which speak a language not to be misunderstood. From the first attack by Great Britain on our neutral rights in 1805, to the present day, these facts have been multiplied, yearly, by the acts of Congress, by the proceedings of the state legislatures, and by the voice of the people. Let not the Representatives of the People, therefore, in either branch of the government, disappoint their reasonable wishes and just expectations.

The pretensions of Great Britain, so unjustly set up, and pertinaciously maintained, by her orders in council, not to enumerate other wrongs, particularly the impressment of our seamen, arrogate to her the complete dominion of the sea, and the exclusion of every flag from it, which does not sail under her license, and on the conditions which she imposes. These pretensions involve no local interest, nor are they of a transient nature. In their operation they violate the rights, and wound deeply the best interests, of the whole American people. If we yield to them, at this time, the cause may be considered as abandoned. There will be no rallying point hereafter. Future attempts to retaliate the wrongs of foreign powers and to vindicate our most sacred rights, will be in vain. The subject must be dismissed from the debates of Congress, and from our diplomatic discussions. An allusion to it will excite contempt abroad, and mortification and shame at home. Should any of our vessels be hereafter seized and condemned, however unjustly, and that all will be seized and condemned may be confidently expected, we must be silent, or be heard by foreign powers in the humble language of petition only.

QUESTIONS (answer in FULL SENTENCES on a separate piece of paper)

- [1] READ the entire letter. Afterwards, ask yourself - would this convince you to go to war? Explain.

- [2] Clay says, "*But it is said that we are not prepared for war, and ought therefore not to declare it. This is an idle objection...*" America's unpreparedness for war - why does he say this is an "idle objection"?

- [3] Why does Clay think we do not need to worry about a British invasion?

- [4] Why does Clay say we do not need to worry about our "*coast and seaport towns*"?

- [5] Clay is concerned about inaction. He states, "*If we yield to them, at this time, the cause may be considered as abandoned.*" Do you think he is right in saying essentially it is "now or never"? Explain.