

Pop-Up Case: Sovereignty and Neutrality in 1807

The newly independent United States has sought to stay neutral during the Napoleonic Wars between France and the British Empire, but harsh constraints on trade and incessant British attacks on American shipping have left the United States questioning how it can exercise its freedom from European entanglements.

Use the following historical case to spark discussion and help students to think through what they would do if they were decision makers. See the back of the page for some inspiration for how to structure your conversation.

The Situation:

At the outbreak of the Napoleonic Wars between France and a Britain-led coalition in 1803, the United States was still in its first decades of independence, striving to protect its newly gained sovereignty. This was no simple task; the new country remained militarily and economically weak compared to the European powers. At the time, the British navy comprised over five hundred warships. The United States, for comparison, had fewer than twenty. Unprepared and unwilling to be drawn into a European conflict, the United States sought to protect its interests by remaining neutral in the war in Europe. Simultaneously, the United States relied on trade with both France and the British Empire as a vital driver of economic growth. Previous conflicts between France and the British Empire had proven advantageous to the U.S. economy, as both countries depended on imports of U.S. raw materials to fuel their war efforts. American exports grew nearly tenfold between 1793 and 1806. By 1806, however, maintaining both neutrality and trade grew difficult, as France and the British Empire imposed blockades to strangle each other's economies and deprive them of access to critical materials.

In theory, international maritime laws at the time protected a neutral country's right to trade. This did not stop British ships from harassing American shipping and seizing U.S. cargo, however. Critically, the British navy also began forcing American sailors into British military service, a practice known as impressment. The British claimed impressed sailors were deserters from the Royal Navy but paid little attention in practice to whether impressed sailors were British or U.S. citizens. By 1807, more than six thousand U.S. citizens had been impressed into the Royal Navy.

British practices were met with outrage in the United States. With the capacity to conduct trade severely limited, the U.S. economy suffered. Moreover, Americans saw British practices as a violation of American sovereignty and a show of disregard for their hard-won independence. Despite growing outrage, the Thomas Jefferson administration remained wary of drawing the United States back into a war with a superior force. Even with the bulk of British forces occupied fighting France, such a war could devastate the U.S. economy, threaten the lives of thousands of U.S. citizens, and risk ending in reoccupation by the United States' former colonial ruler. With the European war showing no sign of letting up and British aggression on the seas mounting, however, the United States feared even a small escalation or miscalculation could draw it into a position that would require action or become a flash point igniting war.

Additional Resources:

1. [Naval Anecdotes Relating to HMS Leopard Versus USS Chesapeake \(June 24, 1807\)](#)
2. [Message From Thomas Jefferson to the United States Congress regarding impressment of U.S. sailors \(January 7, 1806\)](#)
3. [Norfolk Gazette and Publick Ledger account of the Chesapeake-Leopard incident \(June 24, 1807\)](#)



Decision Point: Set on June 25, 1807

Off the coast of Virginia, the British HMS *Leopard* fired upon and boarded the USS *Chesapeake*, an American warship. Three Americans were killed in the assault, eighteen were injured, and several others were impressed into British naval service. News of the incident has brought already simmering tensions over British shipping practices to a boil, prompting many Americans to openly call for war with the British Empire. U.S. forces have begun to plan the defense of critical positions should the incident prove to be the first clash of a larger war. President Jefferson has called a cabinet meeting to decide how to respond to this latest in a series of British affronts. As they deliberate, advisors will need to consider how to protect U.S. interests and assert U.S. sovereignty while taking into account the risks of entering a war with a stronger power.

Cabinet members should consider any combination of the following policy options:

- *Economic measures*, including increased tariffs or an outright embargo on trade with European countries. Ceasing trade could coerce the British Empire into allowing unrestricted trade between the United States and Europe, halt the impressment of Americans, and keep American vessels out of harm's way. However, such an embargo is not guaranteed to work and would deepen economic hardship in the United States before forcing British action.
- *Diplomatic measures*, including negotiations with the British pursuing either an apology and reparations for the incident or a broader agreement easing British restrictions on trade and abolishing impressment. This option could protect U.S. trade, assert U.S. sovereignty, and avert a war. Without any leverage, however, a favorable agreement would be unlikely given previous British indifference toward American sovereignty. Negotiations could also take time, during which British practices could continue and public outrage could grow over the lack of a forceful response.
- *Military action*, including building up U.S. military and naval forces to defend against further attacks or immediately declaring war against the British Empire. This option would most forcefully assert U.S. sovereignty but has the most risks. Even with the bulk of British forces occupied fighting France, the U.S. military is underprepared for a war with the British Empire, and swift military buildup would be costly.

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Pop-Up Case Guidelines

U.S. history pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies examining foreign policy decision-making in U.S. history. Designed with a U.S. history survey course in mind, the cases do assume some pre-existing knowledge for context, but there is sufficient detail in the case to fuel a lively discussion.

For historical cases, a post-discussion debrief is crucial. After a simulation, it is important to give students a chance to step out of character and reflect on the conversation: what was difficult about the decision, what was troubling about its implications. It is also important to discuss what decision was actually made.

There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and are looking for some tips, the introduction to [this page](#) from Model Diplomacy has some great links. If you cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips [here](#) and [here](#)). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

Gauge reaction:

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

Think-Pair-Share:

This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook (“think”), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes (“pair”), and then have students report out to the whole group (“share”), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.



Don Pollard

Whiparound:

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.

Simple simulation:

If you would like to simulate a simplified version of a more realistic policy debate, you can appoint yourself (or a randomly chosen student) president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones) and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president. You could consider assigning students certain perspectives or opinions to encourage debate. For example, different students or groups could prioritize the military, economic, and diplomatic considerations of the case respectively, and use their assigned perspectives to inform their arguments.

Note: In our experience, simulations are often most productive if students focus on the policy issues and do not try to simulate the personality of particular historical figures.

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