

The Quasi-War: America's First Limited War, 1798-1801

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La Quasi-guerre, le conflit naval non déclaré entre les États Unis et la France dans les années 1790, était la première guerre entreprise par les États-Unis hors de ses frontières. C'était également pour cette nation sa première guerre restreinte. Le but était simplement de forcer la France à terminer sa guerre sur le commerce américain. Les navires de guerre américains ainsi que les navires marchands armés ont été autorisés à attaquer les croiseurs français armés qui visaient le commerce américain aussi bien côtier qu'aux Caraïbes et dans d'autres mers. Ce document, une vue d'ensemble du conflit qui synthétise la littérature publiée et incorpore de nouvelles recherches originales, arrive à la conclusion que la guerre était remarquablement bien réussie pour les États-Unis.

The Quasi-War, America's undeclared naval war with France in the 1790s, was the first overseas war waged by the United States. It was also the nation's first limited war. The contest was doubly limited in that both the end and the means were carefully circumscribed. The end was simply to force France to call off its war on American commerce and to resume normal relations. The means employed was reprisals at sea. American warships and armed merchantmen were authorized to attack armed French cruisers, which were preying upon American commerce off the coast, in the Caribbean, and in other seas as well. The war was remarkably successful for the United States, demonstrating that, given the right circumstances, a second-rate power in the late eighteenth century could force a great power to change its policies, even during the fiercely-contested and ideologically-charged French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.¹

The Quasi-War was a direct outgrowth of the French Revolutionary Wars. In 1778, during the American Revolution, the United States and France had signed treaties

¹ There is no comprehensive study of the Quasi-War. The standard work on the political and diplomatic history is Alexander De Conde's *The Quasi-War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France, 1797-1801* (New York, 1966). Writing in the 1960s, De Conde was more interested in why peace prevailed than in what the war accomplished, but his examination of the conflict's international history is still unsurpassed. Michael A. Palmer's *Stoddert's War: Naval Operations during the Quasi-War with France, 1798-1801* (Columbia, SC, 1987) is a first-class study that provides a thoughtful analysis of American strategy and operations and is filled with useful information on the early navy. Gardner W. Allen's *Our Naval War with France* (Boston, 1909) is also useful although it is diffuse and now quite dated.

of alliance and commerce, and the two nations had added a consular convention in 1788. In 1792 the French Revolution precipitated a general European war, and the following year Great Britain joined France's continental enemies. Although still allied to France, the United States was determined to avoid being drawn into this conflict.

The French had no objection to American non-intervention as long as the young republic clearly tilted its foreign policy towards France.² Instead, President George Washington in 1793 issued the Neutrality Proclamation, which declared that it was "the duty and interest of the United States" to "adopt and pursue a conduct friendly and impartial toward the belligerent Powers." The proclamation warned Americans "to avoid all acts and proceedings whatsoever, which may in any manner tend to contravene such disposition."³ The following year Congress adopted the Neutrality Act, which barred Americans from enlisting in foreign military service and prohibited launching military operations from the United States or fitting out foreign armed ships in American ports.⁴

In 1794, the United States went further by signing the Jay Treaty with Great Britain.⁵ This agreement not only dissipated war clouds that hung over the two English-speaking nations but also ushered in an Anglo-American accord that allowed American trade and hence the entire American economy to flourish for the balance of the decade and beyond. American exports, which stood at 33 million dollars in 1794, almost tripled to 94 million dollars in 1801.⁶ In addition, the Jay agreement led to the Pinckney Treaty with Spain, which secured American control over the Old Southwest.⁷ Though the Jay Treaty promoted American interests in a host of ways, the emerging Jeffersonian Republican party was convinced that the nation could have secured more and thus was unrelenting in its attacks on the agreement. Such was the spell cast by Republicans that even today the British treaty rarely receives its due.

² The standard work on Franco-American relations in the 1790s is Albert H. Bowman, *The Struggle for Neutrality: Franco-American Diplomacy during the Federalist Era* (Knoxville, 1974). This should be supplemented with Harry Ammon, *The Genet Mission* (New York, 1973), and William Stinchcomb, *The XYZ Affair* (Westport, CT, 1980).

³ Proclamation of George Washington, Apr. 22, 1793, in U.S. Congress, *American State Papers: Foreign Relations*, 6 vols. (Washington, 1833-59), 1: 140 (hereafter cited as *ASP: FR*).

⁴ See Act of June 5, 1794, in U.S. Congress, *Annals of Congress: Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States, 1789-1824*, 42 vols. (Washington, 1834-56), 3rd Cong., 1st sess., 1461-64 (hereafter cited as *AC*, 3-1, and similarly for other sessions).

⁵ The standard work on the Jay Treaty is Samuel Flagg Bemis, *Jay's Treaty: A Study in Commerce and Diplomacy*, rev. ed. (New Haven, 1962). For the domestic consequences of this treaty, see Jerald A. Combs, *The Jay Treaty: Political Background of the Founding Fathers* (Berkeley, 1970).

⁶ Total trade--exports plus imports--increased even more dramatically, from 68 million dollars in 1794 to 205 million dollars in 1801. See Curtis P. Nettels, *The Emergence of a National Economy, 1775-1815* (New York, 1962), 396.

⁷ See Samuel Flagg Bemis, *Pinckney's Treaty: America's Advantage from Europe's Distress, 1783-1800*, rev. ed. (New Haven, 1960).

The Jay Treaty did not compromise American neutrality nor did it necessarily presage a reorientation of American foreign policy. But French leaders, convinced that the British treaty was a betrayal of the Franco-American alliance, saw it in this light, and their hostility very nearly made it a self-fulfilling prophecy by driving the United States closer to England. In 1796 France severed diplomatic relations with the United States at the ministerial level, and, in violation of international law and the Franco-American treaties, unleashed its warships and privateers on American commerce. France's aim was nothing less than to force the United States to repudiate the Jay Treaty and to loot American trade in the process. Accustomed to bullying the lesser powers of Europe, France assumed that it could do the same to the United States. Unlike France's neighbors, however, the United States was protected by the Atlantic Ocean and the British Navy.

Even so, French depredations took a heavy toll, especially in the Caribbean, where privateers openly plundered American commerce. Cargoes, provisions, and naval stores were often looted at sea, and when brought into port American vessels were condemned in kangaroo courts. In some cases, ships were sold before they were condemned; in others they were sold without a trial. Even when trials were held, shipmasters often had no opportunity to defend their property because their papers were sent to one port for adjudication while they were dispatched to another. "[T]he risque is so great," said a North Carolina Republican in 1797, "that to send a Vessel to the West Indies in the present posture of affairs, seems like giving the property away."⁸

Nor was the danger limited to mercantile property. Many mariners were robbed of their possessions--their sea chests, money, sometimes even their clothes. Shipmasters and seamen were often beaten, sometimes to force them to admit that their cargo was illegal, sometimes for no reason at all. A few hapless victims were even murdered. Many more were dumped on foreign shores with no means of providing for themselves nor any way of getting home. "[I]t would wring your heart to see the distresses of our Seamen," said an American consul in Cuba.⁹ American consuls in the Caribbean and Europe ran up large bills caring for these men.¹⁰

John Adams, who became president in 1797, had to deal with this crisis. When President George Washington had faced a similar crisis in Anglo-American affairs in 1794, he had responded by sending a special mission to London to seek a peaceful solution. The result had been the Jay Treaty. Adams now tried to duplicate Washington's success with a similar mission to France. To serve on the commission he chose two Federalists, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney of South Carolina and John Marshall of

⁸ Richard Dobbs Spaight to Jacob Read, Mar. 5, 1797, in Thomas Addis Emmet Papers, New York Public Library, New York, NY.

⁹ See Statement of Jacob Mayer, Aug. 5, 1797, in Dudley W. Knox, ed., *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War between the United States and France*, 7 vols. (Washington, 1935-38), 1: 25.

¹⁰ For the depredations committed in 1796-97, see Report of the Secretary of State (with enclosures), June 21, 1797, in *ASP: FR*, 2: 28-65, and Pickering to Samuel Sewell (with enclosures), Dec. 27, 1797, in Knox, *Quasi-War*, 1: 20-36.

Virginia, and Elbridge Gerry, a Massachusetts independent who was moving into the Republican camp.

Instead of officially receiving the American envoys, the French government tried to extort money and other concessions as a preliminary to negotiations. The French minister of foreign relations, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord, sent three agents--later designated X, Y, and Z in the American diplomatic dispatches--to present France's terms. To open the door to official negotiations, the United States would have to give French officials a *douceur* or bribe of 1,200,000 French livres (\$223,000), loan the French Government \$12,000,000, and apologize for critical remarks that John Adams' had made about France.¹¹

The American envoys resisted these demands and sent a packet of documents to the State Department indicating the failure of their mission. On 5 March 1798, President Adams sent the latest dispatch to Congress. In it the envoys said "that there exists no hope of our being officially received by this Government, or that the objects of our mission will be in any way accomplished."¹² Two weeks later, after the rest of the documents were deciphered, Adams notified Congress that he could see "no ground of expectation that the objects of [the] mission can be accomplished." Hence he planned to authorize merchant vessels to arm for defense, and he recommended that Congress adopt a broad range of war preparations.¹³

Convinced that the administration had doomed the negotiations by making excessive demands, the Republicans in Congress clamored to see the envoys' instructions and dispatches.¹⁴ Adams complied, first sending those documents in hand and then others as they arrived.¹⁵ The result was outrage in Congress, and when the documents were published, an uproar in the country.¹⁶ "The conduct of the directory towards our Envoys," said one Federalist, "has excited a spirit of universal indignation." "An abhorrence almost universal," added another, "is entertained against the French."¹⁷

There was talk of declaring war, but nothing came of it. President Adams prepared a war message in March of 1798, but he never sent it to Congress.¹⁸ The

¹¹ See American envoys to secretary of state, Oct. 22, 1797, in *ASP: FR*, 2: 157-61.

¹² American envoys to secretary of state, January 8, 1798, in *ASP: FR*, 2: 151.

¹³ Adams to Congress, Mar. 19, 1798, in *AC*, 5-2, 523-24.

¹⁴ See *AC*, 5-2, 525, 535, 1349, 1358-73.

¹⁵ See *ASP: FR*, 2: 153-68, 169-82, 185-201, 204-29.

¹⁶ After printing several hundred copies of the documents for their own use and for limited distribution, Congress ordered 10,000 copies printed for public consumption. Newspapers, always in search of material to fill their pages, published large excerpts from the documents. See *AC*, 5-2, 536-38, 555, 571-72, 581, 583-84, 586, 1377, 1380, 1384, 1393, 1972-73, 2032-33, 3794; De Conde, *Quasi-War*, 74-76.

¹⁷ Nicholas Gilman to William Loughton Smith, Dec. 7, 1798, in Smith Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC; John Johnston to Charles Williamson, April 29, 1798, in Williamson Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago, IL.

¹⁸ De Conde, *Quasi-War*, 68.

following summer John Allen, a Connecticut Federalist, tried to force the House of Representatives to confront the issue by introducing a resolution to appoint a committee to consider "the expediency of declaring, by Legislative act, the state and relation subsisting between the United States and the French Republic." But this resolution was defeated without a division.¹⁹ Although many High Federalists (as the hard-liners are called) would have preferred a declaration of war, they had to settle for lesser measures. Even so, the war program that Federalists forced through Congress in the spring and summer of 1798 was impressive.

Congress adopted one measure that annulled the French treaties.²⁰ Here the nation was on solid ground since eighteenth-century commentators, like Emerich de Vattel, as well as modern students of the subject have acknowledged that a significant breach of a treaty by one party is sufficient grounds for the other party to annul it.²¹ Congress also suspended trade with France and its dependencies.²² Shortly thereafter, President Adams revoked the authority of French consuls in the United States.²³ Later, with congressional approval, the president modified the general ban to allow trade with St. Domingue (modern Haiti), which was controlled by former slaves under Toussaint Louverture, who had thrown off French rule and were eager to reopen trade with the United States.²⁴

The United States had no navy, and American trade was thus completely exposed. To remedy this, Congress adopted legislation that provided for completing and equipping three frigates then under construction and for building and equipping three additional frigates.²⁵ In addition, the administration was authorized to acquire twelve smaller warships (armed with up to 22 guns each) and to increase the manpower on revenue cutters so that these vessels could be used on the high seas.²⁶ Although the nation's revenue cutters already employed some marines, Congress also re-established the Marine Corps to provide musketeers and guards for the nation's warships.²⁷

To protect the nation's coast and territorial waters, Congress provided for the acquisition of ten galleys, appropriated money for coastal fortifications, and authorized

¹⁹ AC, 5-2, 2114, 2116-20. Quotation from p. 2114.

²⁰ AC, 5-2, 588, 2127-28, 3754.

²¹ See American envoys to French envoys, July 23, 1800, in *ASP: FR*, 2: 328; and Omer Y. Elagab, *The Legality of Non-Forcible Counter-Measures in International Law* (Oxford, UK, 1988), 145-46, 154.

²² AC, 5-2, 573, 1865-66, 3737-39.

²³ Allen, *Naval War*, 39.

²⁴ AC, 5-3, 2214, 2791-92, 3795-98; Donald R. Hickey, "America's Response to the Slave Revolt in Haiti, 1791-1806," *Journal of the Early Republic* 2 (Winter 1982): 361-67.

²⁵ AC, 5-2, 526, 610, 1270, 2129, 3717, 3791.

²⁶ AC, 5-2, 538, 583, 1522, 1925, 3722-23, 3743.

²⁷ AC, 5-2, 601, 3774-76; U.S. Congress, *Journal of the House of Representatives*, William Ross edition (Philadelphia, 1799), 5th Cong., 2nd sess., 528 (hereafter cited as *JHR*, 5-2, and similarly for other sessions).

an additional regiment of artillerists and engineers.²⁸ Since Federalists were eager to establish a permanent navy and James McHenry, the incompetent secretary of war, was ill-equipped to manage the nation's growing naval assets, Congress also created the Navy Department.²⁹ John Adams's choice for the nation's first secretary of the navy, Benjamin Stoddert, proved to be a wise one.³⁰

Congress also adopted measures to fend off an invasion. This legislation increased the size of existing infantry regiments; provided for raising twelve additional regiments of infantry and six troops of light dragoons; authorized a provisional army of 10,000 men; and authorized the acceptance of volunteer companies into federal service.³¹ Additional legislation provided for the purchase of cannons, small arms, ammunition, and military stores; the purchase or lease of foundries and armories; and the acquisition of 30,000 stands of arms for the militia.³² A final measure revived an earlier law that prohibited the export of arms while encouraging their importation by suspending the customs duties.³³

To pay for the war program, the nation already had a broad range of customs and excise taxes in place.³⁴ Congress now added a \$2,000,000 direct tax on lands, houses, and slaves.³⁵ Congress also authorized a public loan of \$5,000,000 as well as a \$2,000,000 loan in anticipation of the direct tax.³⁶

As impressive as this program was, the Federalists were not finished. In early 1799 Congress provided for exchanging prisoners with France and for retaliating against French prisoners for the mistreatment of American prisoners.³⁷ Other legislation provided for constructing six ships-of-the-line of at least 74 guns and six sloops-of-war of 18 guns, building two repair docks, and purchasing timber for future ships.³⁸ Still other legislation increased the Marine Corps; created a military medical establishment; and authorized an additional twenty-four regiments of infantry, a regiment and a battalion of

²⁸ *AC*, 5-2, 545, 550, 1402, 1426-27, 1567, 3723-24, 3727, 3725-26.

²⁹ *AC*, 5-2, 541-42, 1554, 3724-25.

³⁰ For an assessment of Stoddert, see Palmer, *Stoddert's War*, 10, 124-31, 233-39. George Cabot, Adams's first choice, declined.

³¹ *AC*, 5-2, 544, 584, 611, 1772, 1954, 2132, 3729-33, 3743-44, 3785-87.

³² *AC*, 5-2, 551, 597, 1440, 1938-39, 3721, 3752-53.

³³ *AC*, 5-2, 531, 1285, 3721. The earlier law, which was adopted in 1794, was scheduled to expire partly in 1795 and partly in 1796. See *AC*, 3-1, 1448. Although the 1798 law speaks of continuing the earlier law, it actually revived a law that had expired.

³⁴ See Davis R. Dewey, *Financial History of the United States*, 12th ed. (New York, 1934), 81-109.

³⁵ *AC*, 5-2, 597, 605, 1925, 2066-67, 3757-70, 3777-85.

³⁶ *AC*, 5-2, 606, 617, 2049, 2181, 3789-92.

³⁷ *AC*, 5-3, 2217-18, 2231, 3052, 3808, 3955; *JHR*, 5-3, 216. The retaliation law was adopted in response to a French threat to treat American seamen found on British ships as pirates. Fortunately, France backed down from this threat, so the United States never had to retaliate.

³⁸ *AC*, 5-3, 2225, 2883, 3804-6.

riflemen, a battalion of artillerists and engineers, and three regiments of cavalry.³⁹ Finally, to provide still more funds, Congress in 1800 boosted the customs duties and authorized an additional loan of \$3,500,000.⁴⁰

Since there had been no declaration of war, Congress had to authorize operations at sea. In late May 1798, warships were authorized to seize armed French vessels committing depredations off the American coast or simply hovering near the coast. The following month, American merchantmen were permitted to arm for defense. Two weeks later, American warships and armed merchantmen were authorized to seize armed French vessels and their prizes anywhere on the high seas.⁴¹ American ships were also authorized to dispose of any prizes they captured as well as any merchant vessels they re-captured.⁴² These measures were all carefully drawn so that they targeted only armed French vessels. Unarmed French ships were off limits.

Launching a navy was no easy task, and Secretary Stoddert had to contend with a host of problems. Some of the warships were poor sailers or had other design problems, and all the ships needed a shakedown cruise. Some of the officers proved incompetent, and some of the men did not take well to naval discipline. Moreover, the Caribbean, which was the principal theater of operations, was too vast to cover adequately with a small navy, and nation's supply lines, which extended from the port cities on the eastern seaboard to the West Indies, were long--typically more than 1,000 miles.⁴³ In addition, bad weather, including an annual hurricane season that lasted from June to October, made operations in the Caribbean dangerous, and disease, especially virulent tropical ailments, took a heavy toll.⁴⁴

Fortunately, the United States had a rich maritime tradition and had long been accustomed to building and manning ships for ocean-going voyages. The first set of frigates was nearly complete when the XYZ crisis broke, and smaller warships could be built or converted from merchantmen fairly quickly.

Thus, even though the nation had no navy in March of 1798, it was able to deploy its first warships in May, and it had ships patrolling the West Indies by July. By the end of 1798 the nation had 21 warships, 14 of which were in the West Indies. By the end of 1799 the total number of American warships had reached 26, 18 of which were in the Caribbean. The nation's naval strength peaked in August of 1800, when it had 32 ships, 22 of which were operating in the Caribbean.⁴⁵ In all, the United States commissioned 49 warships during the war. These consisted of 14 frigates (with 28 to 44

³⁹ *AC*, 5-3, 2224, 2229, 2235, 3018, 3044, 3929-31, 3933-36, 3938-39; *JHR*, 5-3, 513.

⁴⁰ *AC*, 6-1, 171, 181, 633-34, 706, 1500-1, 1528-30.

⁴¹ *AC*, 5-2, 563, 584, 606-7, 1834-35, 1925, 2083, 3733, 3748-49, 3754-57.

⁴² *AC*, 5-2, 582, 2034, 3750-51.

⁴³ See Palmer, *Stoddert's War*, 84.

⁴⁴ Michael Palmer treats many of these problems in *Stoddert's War*. They can be followed in more detail in the documents in Knox, *Quasi-War*.

⁴⁵ For monthly strength and deployment figures, see in Palmer, *Stoddert's War*, Appendix A, 240-41.

guns), 11 smaller ships (with 18 to 24 guns), 2 sloops (with 20 guns), 4 brigs (with 14 to 18 guns), 3 schooners (with 12 to 14 guns), 8 revenue cutters (with 10 to 14 guns), and 7 galleys (with 6 to 7 guns).⁴⁶

The fledgling navy could not eradicate privateering in the Caribbean; even the vaunted British fleet could not accomplish this. Still, the United States Navy gave much-needed protection to American merchantmen by patrolling the seas lanes in the West Indies, by hovering near French ports there, and by convoying merchantmen in and out of the Caribbean. Although concentrating in these waters, the navy also showed the flag in the Wine Islands and Mediterranean as well as beyond the Cape of Good Hope and in the East Indies.⁴⁷

In the course of operations that lasted about two-and-a-half years, the American navy captured two French warships (*l'Insurgente* and *le Berceau*) and nearly destroyed a third (*la Vengeance*) before it slipped away. The only warship the United States lost was the *Retaliation*, although two others (the *Insurgent* and *Pickering*) disappeared at sea. The navy also took 82 French privateers and recaptured some 70 merchant vessels.⁴⁸

Armed American merchantmen played a particularly important role in this war, a role that has been little appreciated by historians. In 1798 452 merchantmen armed for defense; in 1799-1801 the number soared to 933.⁴⁹ Most of these vessels were lightly armed, carrying only five or ten 4- or 6-pounder guns and a few additional crewmen (say 15-20 instead of the usual complement of 5-10). Figures available for 365 vessels armed in the first six months of the war indicate that they averaged 182.7 tons and carried an average of 7.5 guns and 18.8 crewmen.⁵⁰ These figures were probably typical for armed American vessels during the conflict. Shipowners had to be sparing with guns and extra crewmen because they cut into profits and the extra weight might undermine a ship's sailing qualities.

⁴⁶ See Data on U.S. Warships during Quasi-War, in Knox, *Quasi-War*, 7: 364-71.

⁴⁷ See Palmer, *Stoddert's War*, *passim*.

⁴⁸ List of French Armed Vessels Captured by U.S. Men-of-War, in Knox, *Quasi-War*, 7: 311-12; Robert G. Albion and Jennie B. Pope, *Sea Lanes in Wartime: The American Experience*, 2nd ed. ([Hamden, CT], 1968), 83. The French probably lost additional privateers that escaped from an American attack but suffered enough damage to be knocked out of service or to founder at sea.

⁴⁹ See American Armed Merchantmen, 1798, and American Armed Merchantmen, 1799-1801, in Knox, *Quasi-War*, 2: 147-97, and 7: 376-438. There may be some duplicates on each list, and some of the vessels listed may have been foreign-owned, while others may never have sailed. But these were probably offset by those armed vessels that sailed without registering.

⁵⁰ See Statement of Armed Vessels, Mar. 1, 1799, in U.S. Congress, *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, 4 vols. (Washington, 1834-61), 1: 71. The 1799-1801 list prepared for Dudley Knox's work gives the complement of guns for 365 of 933 ships (39.1 percent) and the crew size for 153 ships (15.4 percent). These ships carried an average of 11.1 guns and 22.9 crewmen. These averages surely overstate how well armed and manned American vessels were because smaller armed vessels were less likely to register. Knox, *Quasi-War*, 7: 376-438.

Even lightly armed American merchantmen could often fend off privateers in the Caribbean because the typical French vessel was itself lightly armed and relied on manpower rather than firepower to make its captures. French privateers often carried only 8 or 10 guns but their crews might number 100 or 150 men and occasionally even more.⁵¹ This enabled them easily to overpower the small crews on the typical merchantman they ran down and to put prize crews on board and still continue cruising.

To deter resistance, some French privateers ran up the "bloody flag" when an American ship was in sight. This was a red flag associated with piracy. Normally flown alone but occasionally with the French national flag, the bloody flag served notice on merchantmen that no quarter would be given if any resistance were offered. The purpose of the flag was to frighten merchant seamen into surrendering their vessel and cargo without a fight.⁵²

Undeterred by such threats, armed American vessels made a good showing during the war. Although French privateers captured a fair number of armed merchantmen, sometimes the tables were turned. In the course of the war, armed merchant vessels captured six French privateers and recaptured eight prizes.⁵³ On many other occasions American merchantmen fought off or frightened off French predators. Indeed, since privateers were more interested in booty than battle, sometimes all it took was a single cannon shot or a broadside to drive them off.⁵⁴

The record of armed merchantmen in deterring or fending off attack was so impressive that many Americans thought that they did more to protect trade than the navy. "[T]here could be no doubt," said Republican Albert Gallatin of Pennsylvania, "but the armed private vessels had been of much greater service in preserving our vessels from plunder, than our navy." Our commerce, echoed Federalist John Rutledge, Jr., of South Carolina, "has revived from its depression by means of private armaments."⁵⁵

The operations of American warships and armed merchantmen helped drive down insurance rates for Americans trading in the Caribbean. For ships sailing from the United States to the West Indies, insurance rates in the spring of 1798 typically ranged from 25 to 33 percent of the value of vessel and cargo. By early 1799 these rates had

⁵¹ The list of privateers captured by the U.S. navy in Dudley Knox's work gives the number of guns for 35 of the 82 ships (42.7 percent) and the crew size for 32 of the ships (39.0 percent). These ships carried an average of 8.7 guns and 59.5 men. The original crew size of these ships was surely larger because by the time they were captured most privateers had put prize crews aboard vessels they had taken. Knox, *Quasi-War*, 7: 311-312.

⁵² For reports of French use of the bloody flag, see letters of Charles Findley, July 23, 1800, and of Cap. Callender, Dec. 8, 1800, in Knox, *Quasi-War*, 6: 126, 453; Allen, *Naval War*, 232-34, 237-40. See also Robert C. Ritchie, *Captain Kidd and the War against the Pirates* (Cambridge, MA, 1986), 22, 96, 234-35.

⁵³ See List of Vessels Captured or Recaptured by Armed American Merchantmen, in Knox, *Quasi-War*, 7: 439.

⁵⁴ Knox, *Quasi-War*, vols. 2-6, is loaded with reports of the operations of armed merchantmen.

⁵⁵ Speech of Albert Gallatin, Feb. 7, 1799; and speech of John Rutledge, Jr., Feb. 18, 1799, in *AC*, 5-3, 2826, 2931.

fallen to 17.5 percent, and by early 1800 they stood at about 10 percent. This was not much above the usual peacetime rate of five to seven percent.⁵⁶

American resistance had a remarkable effect on France. Once the French realized that the United States could not be bullied, they became increasingly conciliatory, especially after Napoleon came to power in November of 1799. War was the last thing that France wanted or expected from the United States. Hence the more warlike the United States became, the more eagerly France sought peace. Indeed, hoping to portray France as the leading proponent of freedom of the seas, Napoleon considered peace with the United States essential.⁵⁷

In June of 1798, at the height of the war crisis, President Adams told Congress, "I will never send another minister to France without assurances that he will be received, respected, and honored, as the representative of a great, free, powerful, and independent nation."⁵⁸ By early 1799, Adams had received French assurances from so many sources that he risked the wrath of the High Federalists by nominating as a peace envoy young William Vans Murray, who was the nation's minister to the Dutch Netherlands. Although Senate Federalists were determined to block the nomination, leading members of the party brokered a compromise that called for Adams to broaden the mission to include two older and more reliable party stalwarts. Ultimately, Oliver Ellsworth of Connecticut and William R. Davie of North Carolina joined Murray on the peace mission.⁵⁹

The Ellsworth mission negotiated the Convention of Mortefontaine--also known as the Convention of 1800--which brought the Quasi-War to an end. Although subsequently modified by each side and not ultimately ratified until late 1801, the agreement recognized the end of the Franco-American treaties in exchange for freeing France from any liability for the depredations it had committed since the breakdown in relations. Conventional wisdom holds that this was the best deal the United States could have secured at the time, and given France's unwillingness to part with any money, this assessment may be correct. However, the French were clearly eager to end the war, and the American envoys might well have held out to see whether they could extract any other concessions.⁶⁰

John Adams later called the two diplomatic missions he sent to France "the most splendid diamond in my crown." He would be happy, he added, if his epitaph simply read: "Here lies John Adams, who took upon himself the responsibility of the peace with

⁵⁶ Speech of Harrison Gray Otis, May 26, 1798, in *AC*, 5-2, 1819; Report of House Naval Committee, Jan. 17, 1799, in *AC*, 5-3, 2684; Albion and Pope, *Sea Lanes in Wartime*, 83. British naval operations and a more conciliatory French policy probably also contributed to the decline. See speech of Albert Gallatin, Feb. 7, 1799, in *AC*, 5-3, 2826.

⁵⁷ See De Conde, *Quasi-War*, 243-44, 251-52.

⁵⁸ Adams to Congress, June 21, 1798, in *ASP: FR*, 2: 199.

⁵⁹ De Conde, *Quasi-War*, 178-87.

⁶⁰ The negotiations can be followed in the documents printed in *ASP: FR*, 2: 301-42. The treaty is printed *ibid.*, 295-301. See also De Conde, *Quasi-War*, 223-326.

France in the year 1800."⁶¹ Historians have generally embraced the Adams family view that he put country above party and secured peace at the price of losing the election of 1800. A more gifted leader, however, might have found a way to bring his party along with him. Yet even with a united party behind him, it is difficult to see how Adams would have won re-election. Be that as it may, there is no denying that the nation's first limited war was a remarkable success story for the new nation, and for this reason alone the legacy of John Adams and the Federalists ought to be secure.

⁶¹ De Conde, *Quasi-War*, 339, 471n26.

