

LESSON PLAN:

A “Quasi War”? Exploring the young United States’ almost-conflict with France

Overview: This lesson explores one of the lesser-known military episodes from the first decades of American history: the state of heightened tensions between the young United States and France that took place between 1798 and 1800. Those tensions resulted in a series of naval confrontations between the two countries, though there was never a formal declaration of hostilities. The not-quite-a-war became known as the “Quasi War,” and it served as an important early test of the young Federal government and its Department of War under the new Constitution.

This lesson helps students practice close-reading two documents: a letter from the War Department collection related to the Quasi War episode and Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution. It is suitable for history classes focused on diplomatic relations in early American history, and for history and civics classes studying how the Federal government described in the Constitution was put into action in the country’s first decades.

ACTIVITY:

Historical background: Almost everyone is familiar with America’s War of Independence. And most history textbooks include a section on the War of 1812, fought twenty years after the Revolution against the United States’ historical rival, Britain. But far fewer are aware that in its first years the U.S. very nearly became engaged in another war—this one against its former ally, France.

That near-conflict, which became known as the “Quasi War” because it never resulted in an official declaration of war or in full-blown conflict, unfolded in a series of naval confrontations from 1798 to 1800. It had its roots in the shifting economic realities of the late eighteenth century. France had been an important supporter of the American cause during the War of Independence. French support, in the form of loans, naval warships, and troops, was instrumental in helping the American colonists defeat the much larger and more powerful British military.

Some in France supported the American cause out of genuine sympathy with its declared causes of liberty, equality, and independence. Others in France saw support of the American cause primarily as a way to strike a blow at their oldest rival, Britain. Funneling support to the American patriots made the British task in the American War of Independence even more difficult, and limited what the British could do in their European war against the French.

Victory in their War of Independence left the Americans with their own country, and with sizable debt to the French. When the French revolution overthrew King Louis XVI and established the First French Republic in 1792, the United States stopped paying that debt. The Americans claimed that they owed the debt to a government that no longer existed. That decision, and America’s ratification of the Jay Treaty encouraging trade with Great Britain in 1795, outraged the new French government. France, embroiled in

a war of its own with Great Britain, viewed the actions as violations of America's declared intentions of neutrality.

France responded by attacking American merchant vessels, seizing more than 300 in a span of less than a year. The United States, which had only a tiny navy, was at the mercy of the French naval raiders. In July of 1798, Congress revoked its treaties with France and authorized attacks on French warships discovered in American waters. It was an open invitation to confrontation with the French.

For a young and relatively untested nation, the stakes were high. France was a well-established European power with sizable military forces. Why did President Adams and the young United States believe they could risk a fight with a much larger and more powerful opponent? Where did the Federal government get the powers necessary to wage the fight?

Lesson objective: To explore learn more about the early foreign relations of the young United States by examining internal appraisals of the looming standoff with France. This lesson gives students a look into a letter from the Secretary of War as the nation edged uneasily toward a potential conflict with its former ally, France. It also guides students to connect the Quasi War episode with specific language from the Constitution that enabled the new Federal government to confront rivals.

How did the small, young nation look at the possibility of a war with a larger and much more powerful opponent? Where did the powers to wage the Quasi War come from?

Students will practice close-reading historical documents by looking at two eighteenth-century documents: a letter sent from Secretary of War James McHenry contemplating the possibility of conflict with France, and Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution, which enumerates the powers given to Congress, including the powers necessary to defend the nation in time of war.

Lesson materials

Primary source document packet:

Document A, Secretary of War James McHenry's 1797 letter to William Laughton Smith

Document B, United States Constitution, Article I, Section 8

Historian's worksheet

Teacher answer key

Lesson preparation

Prepare copies of both documents and the historian’s worksheet for students. If your students are fairly new to working with primary-source documents from the late 1700s, this may work better as a group exercise. The language in these letters is fairly stilted, and requires some interpretation, inference, and educated guesswork to interpret.

Lesson procedure

Optional icebreaker introduction: The primary sources are transcribed versions of handwritten eighteenth-century originals. A digital scan of Document A accompanies the transcription. If your students can read cursive handwriting, you have the option to begin the lesson with a short exercise in which students transcribe the document themselves.

This is an exercise that often works best in groups, since good transcribers must often use context clues and inference to figure out words and abbreviations that are unclear. With the exception of the War Department’s clerks (who had good penmanship as part of their job description), eighteenth-century handwriting was often cramped and confusing, and sometimes nearly indecipherable.

Students will likely find this process extremely frustrating—professional historians find it frustrating, too! Besides the mediocre penmanship, Document A has many cross-outs and corrections, and only the most dedicated students will be able to transcribe even a few lines.

But a five-minute attempt to transcribe the document can help them appreciate the challenges that teachers and textbook authors face in making sense of original letters from this period, even if the students’ own attempts are unsuccessful. Teachers can furnish the typed transcription for students to use for the main activity.

This lesson fits in the era known as the “Federal period” that extended from the ratification of the constitution in the late 1780s to Thomas Jefferson’s inauguration in 1801. America had only recently won its independence from England in the long and grueling War of Independence. After five years of a weak central government under the Articles of Confederation, leaders from the thirteen colonies convened in Philadelphia during the summer of 1787 to draft a new Constitution that gave new responsibilities and new powers to a considerably strengthened Federal government enshrined in the Constitution.

Among the responsibilities granted to the Federal government was “to provide for the common defense.” To that end, the Constitution granted the Federal government, in the form of Congress, the power to “raise and support armies,” and to “provide and maintain a navy.” Importantly, the Constitution also stipulates that “no appropriation of money to that use shall be for a longer term than two years.”

One of the early tests of the nation’s new military forces was the heightened tensions between the United States and France. France was outraged by America’s refusal to pay the new French Republic the debt it

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owed to the deposed French King Louis XVI and by its decision to use the Jay Treaty to open trade with France's rival Britain. French naval vessels began attacking American ships in the mid-1790s. In response, the Congress revoked its treaties with France and authorized American ships to attack French vessels.

Begin the lesson by engaging the class in some brainstorming before starting the group exercise: What are the relative strengths and weaknesses of the United States in a confrontation with France? Why would the United States be willing to risk a fight with a much more powerful nation?

American weaknesses are straightforward: The U.S. was a new nation with a new government; lacked a navy; lacked substantial financial resources to wage war; and had few allies. The U.S. was a small, new nation contemplating war with a much larger, more powerful, well-established power.

American strengths are much more difficult. As the documents show, most dealt with the fact that France was engaged in struggles of its own against other powers on the European continent, and could not afford to divert too many ships or too many resources to a fight a thousand miles across the Atlantic ocean.

Once the students have attempted some rough guesses about the strengths and weaknesses of both the United States and France, distribute copies of **Documents A and B**. (If your students cannot read cursive or if time does not permit them to attempt a transcription, the original document image serves primarily as an illustration rather than a critical part of the activity). Give each student a copy of **Historian's worksheet**.

Have the students begin by paraphrasing both documents. (If students are new to this kind of –primary-source activity, this step may work better as a group exercise, since students can work together to interpret the points. The **Teacher Answer Key** includes a sample paraphrase of both documents for you to use as a model.

Then ask students to use their paraphrase of **Document A** to complete the **Historian's Worksheet**. This part of the exercise asks the students to locate the four points that X John McHenry identified as America's advantages in a potential war against France. The **Teacher Answer Key** provides a guide to the four themes the students should identify in the document.

Finally, have the class look at **Document B**, Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution. (This is often referred to as the "Enumerated Powers" of Congress, since it lays out all of the powers that the legislative branch possesses to manage the country's affairs.) Ask students to highlight the powers the Constitution gives to Congress that affect the preparations for the confrontation with France.

Once students have completed the worksheet, reconvene the class. Students can compare their worksheets to confirm the information in the answer key. This is a good jumping-off point to discuss geopolitics in the late-eighteenth century: Most of the advantages that McHenry identifies in his memo do not stem from the intrinsic strength of the United States, which was still a young, small, and weak nation. Rather they stem from the fact that France's decisions with regard to North America had to consider the other alliances and rivalries that the French had to balance on the continent of Europe. Those allies, and their most powerful rival Great Britain, were all much closer to France and could do much more damage to the

French nation if provoked, McHenry judges, reasonably, that the French concerns in Europe will limit what they can do on the coast of the United States and increases the ability of the United States to engage with a stronger and more established opponent.

A good concluding discussion revolves around the stipulation that “no Appropriation of Money to that Use [to raise and support an army or navy] shall be for a longer Term than two Years.” Why would the framers of the Constitution include that language? Why two years?

Brainstorming the second part of that question first can help lead students to the answer: Two years is the same term as a representative in the House. The Constitution is written so that no Congress can make open-ended or permanent guarantees for standing military forces. The framers’ experience with the British Army during the colonial period had made them deeply suspect of standing armies, which they viewed as crippling expensive and likely to be used as instruments of tyranny. The stipulation in Article I, Section 8 is meant to prevent the establishment of a permanent, professional, standing army.

Optional concluding exercise: Based on their new knowledge of the geopolitical realities of the late-eighteenth century Atlantic world, have students draft a short political speech from a hawkish (that is, pro-war) Congressional representative encouraging direct confrontation with France over its naval provocations. That speech should attempt to reassure Americans wary of getting involved in a fight with a larger, more powerful opponent. It can draw nearly entirely on the ideas James McHenry raised in **Document A**.