

James Madison after the War of 1812: The Era of Good Feelings

What do African pirates, American highways and British forts all have in common? President Madison paid attention to all of them in the 'Era of Good Feelings'.

The Era of Good Feelings.

Despite enduring a total naval blockade and heavy losses, many Americans felt that the nation had won the War of 1812. General Andrew Jackson's ragtag force of free blacks, pirates and militia defeated the British at the Battle of New Orleans after the Treaty of Ghent was signed, but Americans did not know that at the time. It certainly appeared that Jackson's heroic victory, on the heels of Britain's failed invasion of Baltimore, had forced the British to surrender. Federalists who had intended to secede New England in protest over the war were thoroughly discredited and their party gone for good from federal politics.

Once America was done fighting the British, it could turn its attention to an old problem: Barbary Pirates. Though Jefferson had trounced them a decade earlier, the American military had been kind of busy during the War of 1812, and this left merchant ships in the Mediterranean vulnerable once again. The pirates were back to their old tricks of capturing cargo and crew, holding them for ransom or selling them into slavery. So when the War of 1812 was over, Madison dispatched the navy back to the North African Coast for the Second Barbary War, which lasted about two weeks. The U.S. navy captured every Algerian ship it encountered, and by the time they had reached Algiers, threatened to destroy the city if all Christian captives (both American and European) were not immediately released and the value of seized cargo wasn't reimbursed. The treaty signed onboard an American ship in 1815 ended America's pirate problem in the Mediterranean for good. By outward appearances, there was consensus in politics, improvement in the economy and peace abroad. It was the beginning of the **Era of Good Feelings**.

Madison's Economic Reforms

Of course, things are not always as good as they seem. The Democratic-Republicans might have been the only viable political party on a national level, but the nation was actually deeply divided over several issues, especially its finances. At first, President Madison wanted to keep going down the road Jefferson had taken, undoing some of Hamilton's economic policies. For example, the Democratic-Republicans had totally opposed the Bank of the United States. Madison allowed the Bank's 20-year charter to expire during his first term, and he refused to sign a bill that reauthorized it. The party had believed that a national bank was unconstitutional and that it threatened to concentrate financial power with the elite at the expense of yeoman farmers. But then came the War of 1812, and Madison realized just how difficult it was to finance a war without a national bank, so he finally signed a bill chartering the Second Bank of the United States, which helped stabilize the economy.