THE BRITISH BLOCKADE

Donald Hickey: The federalists had built a navy in the 1790s, at the heart of which were thirteen frigates. When the republicans took over in 1801, they took most of those ships out of service and they rotted. And so by 1812 we only had seven frigates plus a number of smaller vessels.

Victor Suthren: As the War of 1812 progressed the overwhelming strength of the Royal Navy meant that the frigate force of the U.S. Navy was blockaded increasingly into harbor. It was very difficult for them to escape.

Andrew Lambert: By the middle of 1813, the British had complete control over the entire American seaboard all the way down the eastern seaboard. No American ships could get to sea. No American ships could operate even interstate trade on coastal routes. So the American economic system just stops. Some states have too much tobacco, others have too much grain, others have too much lumber. But nobody can build an economic system.

Victor Suthren: Trying to in the new war put in place a blockade at the American coast which it did quite effectively. But that meant that the Royal Navy vessels were often undermanned. They were often stretched to the limit in terms of their resources, in terms of exhaustion and being on station for a long time.

Andrew Lambert: But of course, the Royal Navy is very busy doing lots of other things. There’s a big fleet in the Mediterranean, there’s a big fleet in the Atlantic Approaches, there’s a big fleet on the coast of Belgium, there’s a big fleet in the Baltic, there’s a fleet in the Far East.

Victor Suthren: Denied the chance to, to use their navy to, to attack British shipping America turned to the privateer. And Baltimore was the particular source of these vessels. on Chesapeake Bay, particularly operating out of the city of Baltimore, is a very fast kind of schooner design had, had evolved. These were called the ‘Baltimore clipper schooners.’ They had rigs, masts and very sharp bows. They were extremely quick, and able to out-sail almost anything that the British could, could bring against them.

Vince Leggett: The privateers on the sea are primarily ex-Navy officers who actually petitioned the Secretary of the Navy to commandeer British vessels. They would be given a percentage of the spoils if they would capture a British vessel, they would split the spoils, and so there was a financial incentive. And then also they weren’t guided by all of the quote unquote rules of war. They were almost a guerilla outfit with boats.

Andrew Lambert: American seafarers are good. There’s a lot of high quality seafaring talent, a lot of good ships. And Baltimore clippers are absolutely perfect for this kind of activity. They range right around the Atlantic and they’re operating in the English Channel and the Irish Sea. They’re very effective at capturing ships. They’re not very effective at getting them back to America. Most privateer captures are recaptured by the British, because the British have this stranglehold of the American coast. So ships trying to get into American harbors are normally recaptured. So the British are paying out insurance on ships, and then getting them back. The British will not be beaten in this way.

The British Blockade transcript
Donald Hickey: There was extensive trade with Great Britain that continued during the war, in other words, trade with the enemy in spite of enemy trade acts adopted by congress. Now this happened all in on all frontiers as far as south as St. Mary’s on the coast of Georgia. There were British ships that were nearby, and they were trading with Americans. And then all along the British coast Americans were supplying those blockading ships.

Republicans as well as Federalists engaged in this illegal traffic. It was very, very difficult for the US government to suppress it. They simply didn’t have the numbers, either the military force available or customs officials to suppress this trade. So in this ongoing war between smugglers and U.S. officials, I think the smugglers generally won.