

## 2. A Jeffersonian (W. B. Giles) Upholds the Embargo (1808)

*Stung by Federalist criticisms of the embargo, Senator W. B. Giles of Virginia sprang to its defense. A prickly personage but a brilliant debater, he had assailed or was to assail virtually every figure prominent in public life. Bitterly anti-Hamilton and anti-British, he was more Jeffersonian than Jefferson himself. Is his argument for the coercive role of the embargo as convincing as that for the precautionary role?*

Sir, I have always understood that there were two subjects contemplated by the embargo laws. The first, precautionary, operating upon ourselves. The second, coercive, operating upon the aggressing belligerents. Precautionary, in saving our seamen, our ships, and our merchandise from the plunder of our enemies, and avoiding the calamities of war. Coercive, by addressing strong appeals to the interests of both the belligerents.

The first object has been answered beyond my most sanguine expectations. To make a fair and just estimate of this measure, reference should be had to our situation at the time of its adoption. At that time, the aggressions of both the belligerents

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\*The British, seeking to forestall Napoleon, had bombarded and captured the neutral Danish capital in 1807.

<sup>2</sup>*Annals of Congress*, 10th Congress, 2d Sess., 96-106, passim.



were such as to leave the United States but a painful alternative in the choice of one of three measures, to wit, the embargo, war, or submission. . . .

It was found that merchandise to the value of one hundred millions of dollars was actually afloat, in vessels amounting in value to twenty millions more; that an amount of merchandise and vessels equal to fifty millions of dollars more was expected to be shortly put afloat; and that it would require fifty thousand seamen to be employed in the navigation of this enormous amount of property. The administration was informed of the hostile edicts of France previously issued, and then in a state of execution; and of an intention on the part of Great Britain to issue her orders [in Council], the character and object of which were also known. The object was to sweep this valuable commerce from the ocean. The situation of this commerce was as well known to Great Britain as to ourselves, and her inordinate cupidity could not withstand the temptation of the rich booty she vainly thought within her power. This was the state of information at the time this measure was recommended.

The President of the United States, ever watchful and anxious for the preservation of the persons and property of all our fellow citizens, but particularly of the merchants, whose property is most exposed to danger, and of the seamen, whose persons are also most exposed, recommended the embargo for the protection of both. And it has saved and protected both. . . . It is admitted by all that the embargo laws have saved this enormous amount of property and this number of seamen, which, without them, would have forcibly gone into the hands of our enemies, to pamper their arrogance, stimulate their injustice, and increase their means of annoyance.

I should suppose, Mr. President, this saving worth some notice. But, sir, we are told that, instead of protecting our seamen, it has driven them out of the country, and into foreign service. I believe, sir, that this fact is greatly exaggerated. But, sir, suppose for a moment that it is so, the government has done all, in this respect, it was bound to do. It placed these seamen in the bosoms of their friends and families, in a state of perfect security. And if they have since thought proper to abandon these blessings and emigrate from their country, it was an act of choice, not of necessity. . . .

. . . But, sir, these are not the only good effects of the embargo. It has preserved our peace—it has saved our honor—it has saved our national independence. Are these savings not worth notice? Are these blessings not worth preserving. . . .?

The gentleman next triumphantly tells us that the embargo laws have not had their expected effects upon the aggressing belligerents. That they have not had their complete effects; that they have not caused a revocation of the British orders and French decrees, will readily be admitted. But they certainly have not been without some beneficial effects upon those nations. . . .

The first effect of the embargo upon the aggressing belligerents was to lessen their inducements to war, by keeping out of their way the rich spoils of our commerce, which had invited their cupidity, and which was saved by those laws. . . .

The second effect which the embargo laws have had on the aggressing belligerents is to enhance the prices of all American produce, especially articles of the first necessity to them, to a considerable degree; and, if it be a little longer persisted in, will either banish our produce (which I believe indispensable to them) from their

*Chapter 11 The Triumphs and Travails of the Jeffersonian Republic, 1800–1812*

markets altogether, or increase the prices to an enormous amount; and, of course, we may hope will furnish irresistible inducements for a relaxation of their hostile orders and edicts.

*[The effects of the embargo ultimately proved disastrous. Confronted with anarchy and bankruptcy, Jefferson engineered its repeal in 1809 and the substitution of a more limited Non-Intercourse Act.]*