

Department of Political Science  
Center for Middle Eastern Studies  
Rutgers University

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# The Economic and Political Origins of the War of 1812

Eric Davis

[davis@polisci.rutgers.edu](mailto:davis@polisci.rutgers.edu)

[http:// fas-polisci.rutgers.edu](http://fas-polisci.rutgers.edu)

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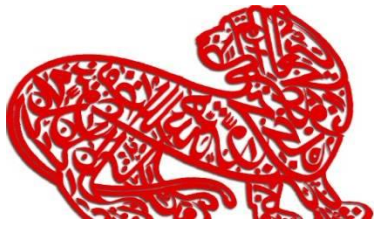
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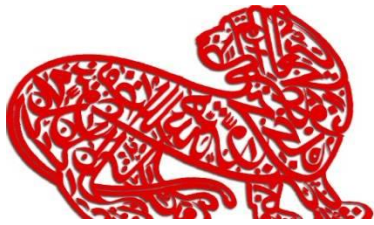
June 30, 2011

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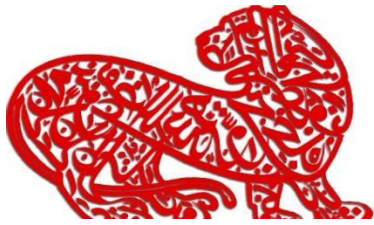
# What are this module's learning objectives?

- ☐ What were the causes of the War of 1812?
  - ☐ What were the underlying tensions that led to war between Great Britain and the US?
  - ☐ How did naval and military technology develop during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and what effect did these developments have on the war?
  - ☐ How was the War of 1812 related to the Barbary Wars?
  - ☐ What was the impact of the War of 1812 on the US, domestically and internationally?
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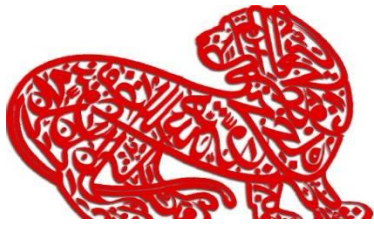
# Origins of War of 1812 (1812-15)

- ❑ US angry after Revolutionary War when Britain refused to withdraw from Great Lakes territory
  - ❑ Britain continued to support Native American tribes
  - ❑ Britain refused to sign commercial treaties with US and Britain tried to stop US exports to France in early 1800s as Britain and France fought Napoleonic Wars (1802-15)
  - ❑ When US refused to comply, Britain began policy of *impressment* of sailors on American ships which created strong tensions with Britain (Britain began policy 1664)
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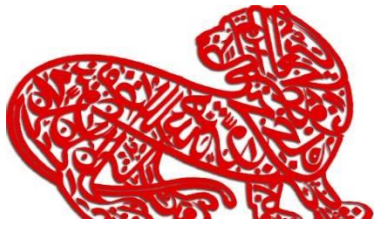
# The Embargo Act of 1807

- ❑ Embargo Act was key cause of War of 1812
  - ❑ Embargo and Nonintercourse acts were efforts to prevent US from trading with Britain between 1807 and 1812
  - ❑ Jefferson believed Europe dependent on US agricultural exports
  - ❑ Presidents Jefferson and Madison supported laws in futile attempt to keep US out of war with 2 powers
  - ❑ US became a pawn in life and death struggle between Great Britain and France
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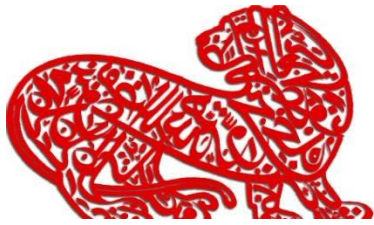
# The Embargo Act of 1807

- ❑ Britain began policy of *impressment* of sailors on American ships after 1793 when wars with Napoleonic France began
  - ❑ Impressment of American sailors created strong tensions with Britain (policy began 1664)
  - ❑ In 1807 HMS *Leopard* fired on USS *Chesapeake*, thinking British deserters on ship
  - ❑ This led to *Embargo Act*, which devastated New England economy, and turned US public opinion against Britain
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# Role of privateers in War of 1812

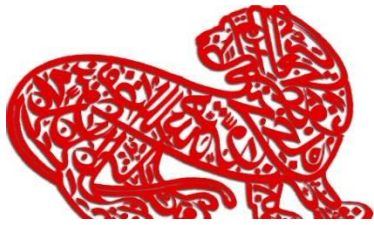
- ❑ Real naval battles in war fought by privateers and merchant marine ships
  - ❑ US had small navy with 23 ships while privateers counted 517 ships
  - ❑ US navy had 556 to privateers' 2893 guns
  - ❑ Navy captured 254 ships while privateers captured 1300 ships
  - ❑ Privateers captured British goods and materiel worth more than \$40,000,000
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# Domestic dimension of War of 1812

- ❑ War was highly divisive and many Americans didn't support it
  - ❑ Federalists and Northeast against war since they thought it would disrupt trade with Britain
  - ❑ House voted 79-49 to declare war and Senate 10-13, indicating dissension on the war
  - ❑ Federalists saw war as designed to gain more Western territories at British expense that would help Democratic (Jeffersonian) Republicans
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Sailor being  
Impressed into  
British navy

War of  
1812 naval  
Hero, John  
Paul Jones



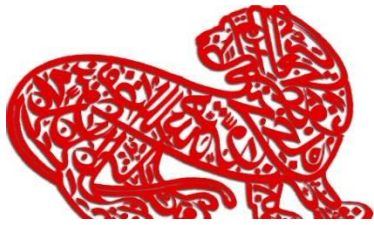
## Images from the War



Sacking of Washington, D.C. (Aug. 1814)

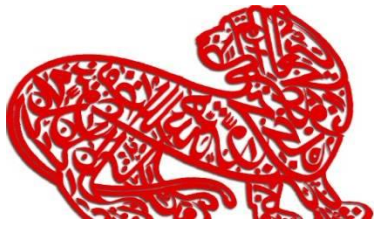






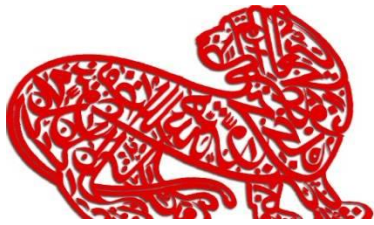
# The incoherence of the War of 1812

- ❑ War was fought in many theaters and did not have a central narrative
  - ❑ Battles occurred in the Atlantic Ocean, Gulf of Mexico, the Great Lakes, Lake Champlain and along Canadian border
  - ❑ Despite many “war hawks” in Congress - Henry Clay, Felix Grundy and John Calhoun -there was little agreement on what US would accomplish with war
  - ❑ Madison mistakenly thought Britain would end its policies once war was declared against it by US
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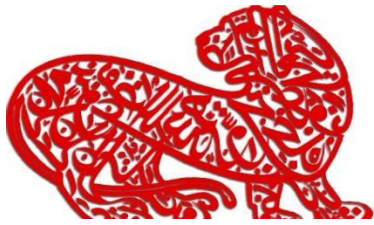
# The role of Canada in the war

- ❑ Uppermost of US goals was capture of Canada
  - ❑ Never clear whether Pres. Madison wanted to annex Canada or use it as bargaining chip to end British impressments and improve overseas trade
  - ❑ Canada was vulnerable to attack since poorly defended and had small number of British troops
  - ❑ British had small naval presence on Lake Champlain and Lake Erie
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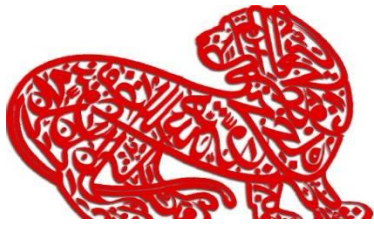
# The conduct of the War of 1812

- ❑ Congress elected 1810 contained powerful group known as *War Hawks*, from south and West, who pushed for war
  - ❑ War fought along long Canadian border, and in Chesapeake Bay, Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean (including US privateers)
  - ❑ US failed to invade Canada, did poorly at sea, and New England economy experienced severe recession
  - ❑ Federalists pushed for secession at *Hartford Conference* (12/1814-1/1815) in attempt to end war
  - ❑ US defeated by time signed Treaty of Ghent (Dec.24, 1814)
  - ❑ Only Battle of New Orleans (Jan. 1815) - that fought in after war over - led to great US victory when Andrew Jackson defeated much larger British army
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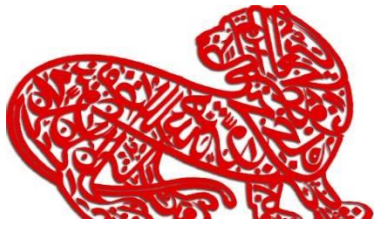
# The burning of Washington, DC

- ❑ Once Napoleon defeated in April 1814 and exiled to island of Elba, British could focus more of their forces on the US
  - ❑ British focused on two prong attack – one from Canada down into Lake Champlain – and other into Chesapeake bay region
  - ❑ US Sec. of War, John Armstrong, thought British would attack Baltimore rather than strategically unimportant city of Washington
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# The burning of Washington, DC

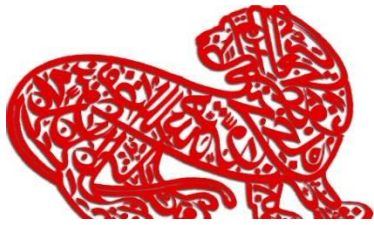
- ❑ Commander of US forces in Maryland, John Winder, realized that Bladensburg was key to defending Washington
  - ❑ Bladensburg controlled roads to Annapolis and Baltimore
  - ❑ US forces made many strategic blunders and might have prevented British from seizing town
  - ❑ Instead, Americans were routed and ran from battlefield in what is known as “Bladensburg Race”
-



# The burning of Washington, DC

- ❑ British now had open road to nation's capital
  - ❑ Battle of Bladensburg termed the “most humiliating episode in American history.”
  - ❑ Fleeing militia actually ran through streets of Washington
  - ❑ British entered city where they were ordered to burn every public building
  - ❑ White House and Capitol Building largely destroyed (but private homes largely untouched)
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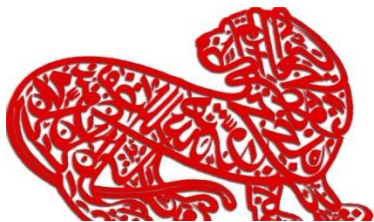
Reasons for burning said  
to have been retaliation  
for US burning of public  
buildings in York, Canada

British commanders said  
attack's aim of attack was to  
undermine American morale

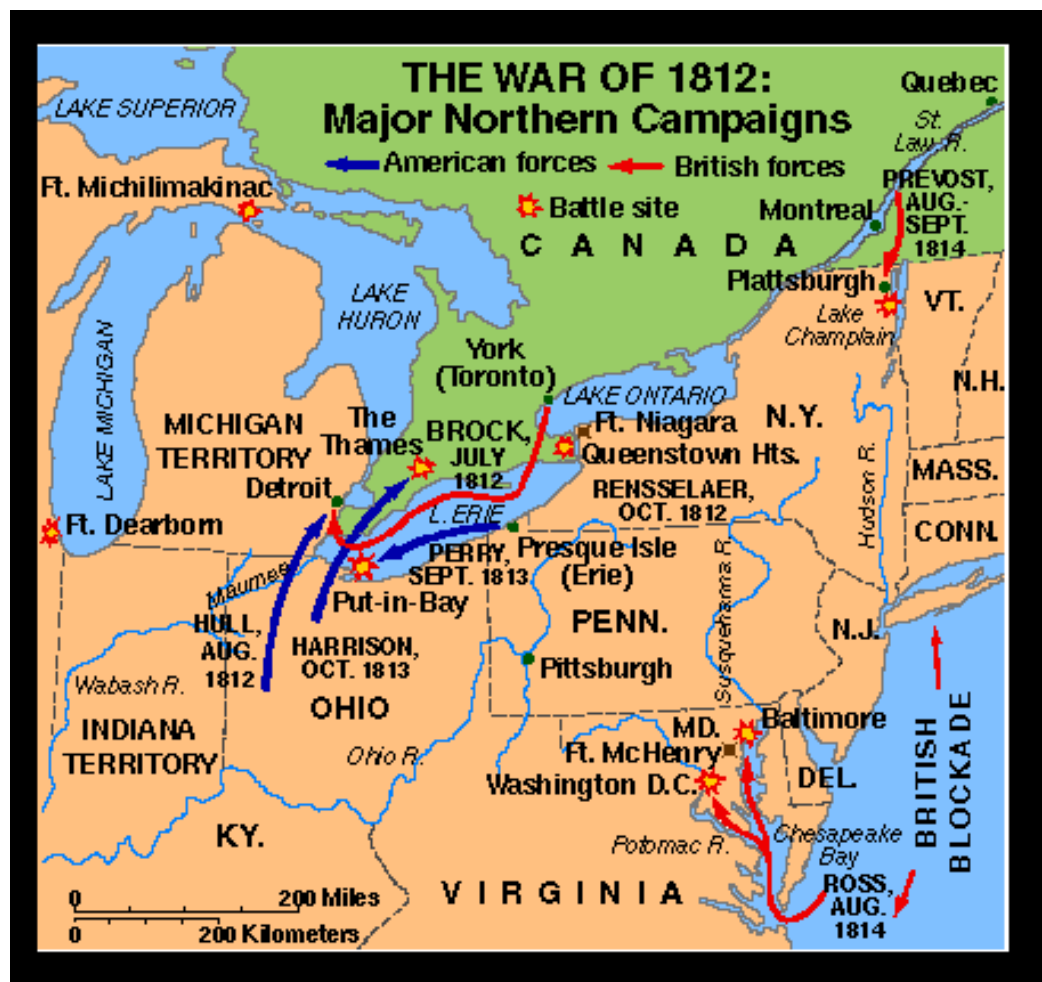


Capture and Burning of  
Washington by the British,  
1814 (1876) Library of  
Congress

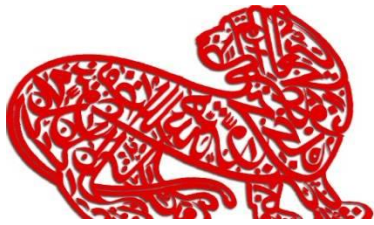
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# Northern campaign during War of 1812

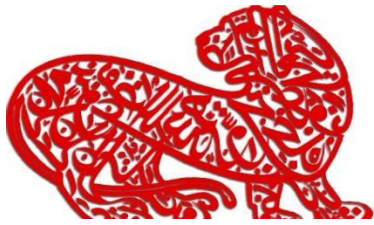


Symbol of American  
nationalism during  
War of 1812  
Motto: “Free trade and  
sailors’ rights!”



# Battle of Lake Erie

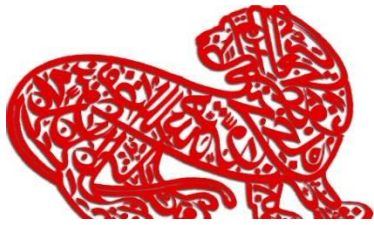
- ❑ Battle fought on Sept. 10, 1813 between 9 US and 6 ships of British navy, which US captured
  - ❑ US was able to control lake for rest of the war
  - ❑ After Britain seized lake at beginning of war, US began construction of corvettes near Erie, PA
  - ❑ US naval force under control of Oliver Hazard Perry
  - ❑ British forces under Commander Robert Heriot Barclay were starved of supplies and reinforcements
  - ❑ From battle came famous saying by Perry, “We have met the enemy and he is ours!”
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# Preparation for Battle of Lake Erie

- ❑ In famous study of War of 1812, Theodore Roosevelt argued US won battle due to “superior heavy metal” used in ships’ cannons
  - ❑ Perry built US squadron at Presque Isle, PA, which surrounded by sand bar
  - ❑ Sand bar prevented British fleet from attacking as US built its ships at Presque Isle
  - ❑ However, all cannon had to off loaded from new US ships to float them over sand bar into Lake Erie
  - ❑ After battle, US forces pursued British and defeated them at battle of Thames in Ontario on Oct. 5, 1813 where Shawneh chief Tecumseh killed
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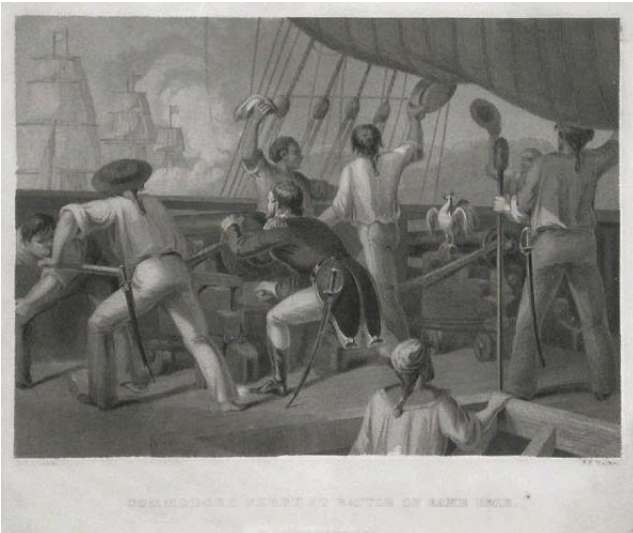
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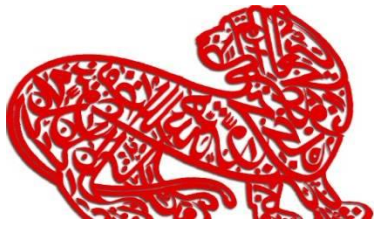
## Images from the Battle of Lake Erie



Painting by Wm. Henry Powell  
Cincinnati, 1865



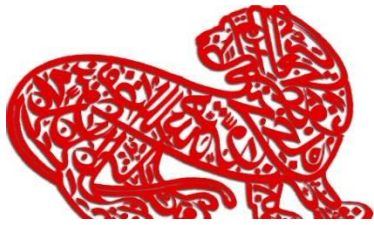
Commodore Perry at Battle of Lake Erie,  
F.F. Walker, 1823



# Battle of Lake Champlain

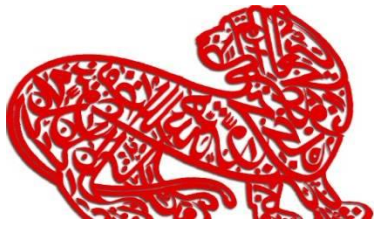
- ❑ Also known as Battle of Plattsburgh, involved land and sea battle and lasted Sept. 6-11, 1814
  - ❑ Battle occurred just before Battle of Ghent when treaty ending war was signed
  - ❑ Battle prevented British from invoking *Uti Possidetis* or claim to land held at end hostilities
  - ❑ Battle brought Vermont into war on US side and stopped British from reasserting control over Lake Champlain
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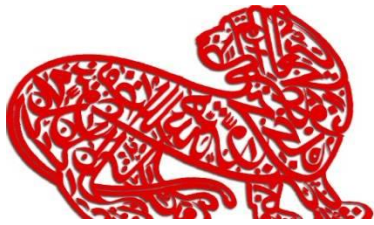
Congressional medal given to Alexander Macomb – commander of US forces at Battle of Lake Champlain - who later became chief of US army in 1828

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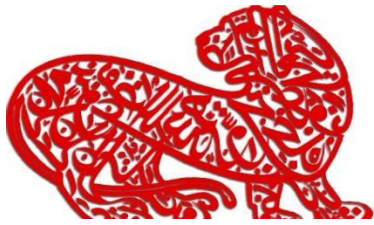
# The Battle of New Orleans

- ❑ Series of battles took place between Dec. 1814 and Jan. 1815 for control of city of New Orleans
  - ❑ American victory not just important as end to War of 1812 but forced British to recognize Louisiana Purchase and US interests in Gulf of Mexico area
  - ❑ British sent 11000-14500 battle hardened troops who had served in Napoleonic wars
  - ❑ US only had between 3500-5000 troops which included men from state militias, Choctaw Indians, Baratarian pirates and freed black slaves exico
-



# The Battle of New Orleans

- ❑ Fighting which continued through Dec, 1814 and into Jan, 1815, was supported by all segments of the New Orleans community
  - ❑ Slaves helped build fortifications and women contributed uniforms, bandages and nursed wounded soldiers
  - ❑ First and Second Battalions of Free Men of Color played important role in fighting
  - ❑ New Orleans males over 45, black and white, formed home defense committees
  - ❑ Louisiana became first state to give man of African descent a military commission
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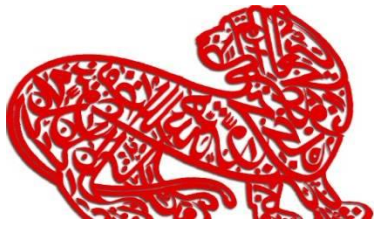
# The Battle of New Orleans

- ❑ On New Year's Day, 1815, American forces won important victory over British
  - ❑ Decisive victory came on January 8, 1815
  - ❑ British forces suffered 2000 casualties to American forces' 71
  - ❑ 2 generals killed in battle including Maj.-Gen. Edward Packenham
  - ❑ British withdrew from New Orleans to return to their base in Jamaica
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# Battle of New Orleans (January 1815)

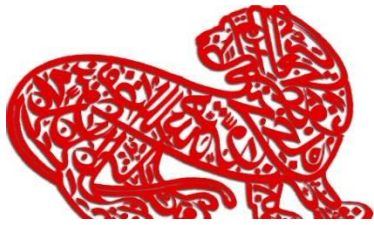




## US naval development prior to War of 1812

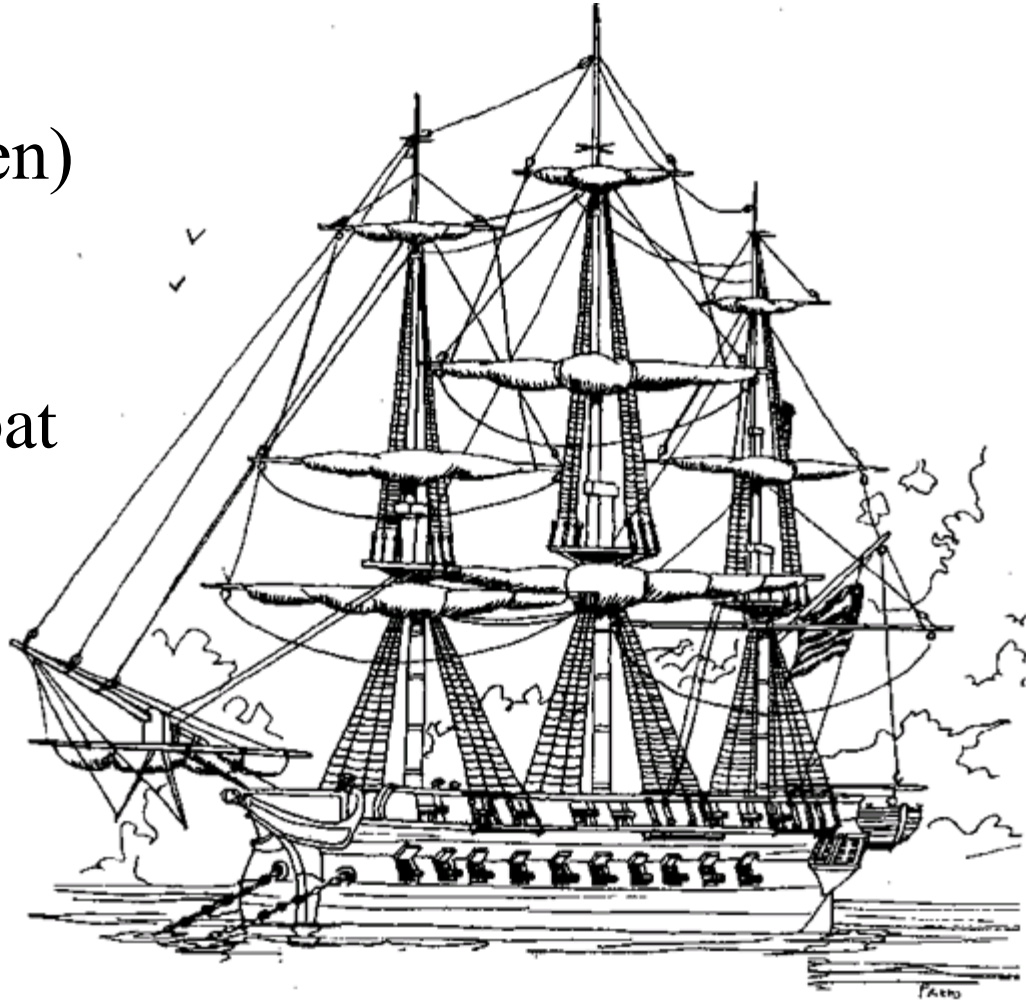
- ❑ US participation in “Quasi War” with France and First Barbary War helped in War of 1812
  - ❑ US began construction of 6 frigates with passage of Naval Act of 1794
  - ❑ US also began building new shipyards and expanding existing ones to accommodate expansion of trade with Europe, Mediterranean and West Indies
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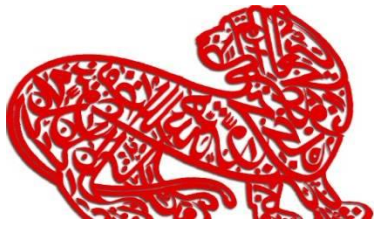
On “spar (upper, open)  
deck,” short guns  
called carronades  
Used for close combat

On “gun deck,”  
next deck down  
were heavy  
guns



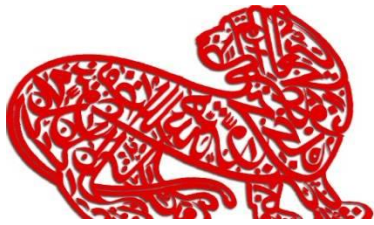
USS Constitution (“Old Ironsides”), 1797

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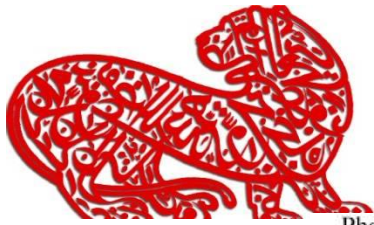
## The development of the US navy frigate

- ❑ Term frigate comes from the Italian “fregata” (frigatebird) and refers to ships known for speed and maneuverability developed in 1500s
  - ❑ US frigates were excellent ships: *Chesapeake*, *Constitution*, *Constellation*, *President*, *United States* and *Congress*
  - ❑ George Washington named first 5 using principles of US Constitution for each
  - ❑ Sec of Navy Stoddert named *Chesapeake* 1799
-



## The benefits of the frigate

- ❑ Frigates could shoot guns even in rough seas
  - ❑ They were unable, until 18<sup>th</sup> century, to stand and fight a major sea battle
  - ❑ Thus they were especially useful for hit and run attacks
  - ❑ Frigates and classes of ships built by number of excellent naval architects, Henry Eckford, Joshua Humphries, Christian Bergh and Lester Beebe
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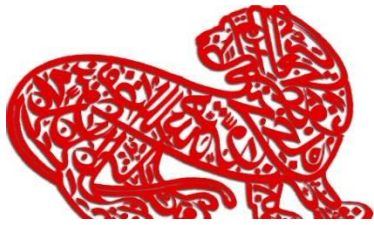
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Photo # NH 1999 "Action Between the Constitution & the Guerriere". Engraving by Rogers after Chapin



USS *Constitution* captures *Guerriere*, Aug. 19, 1812





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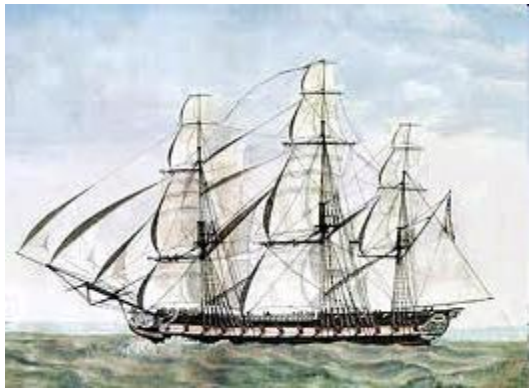
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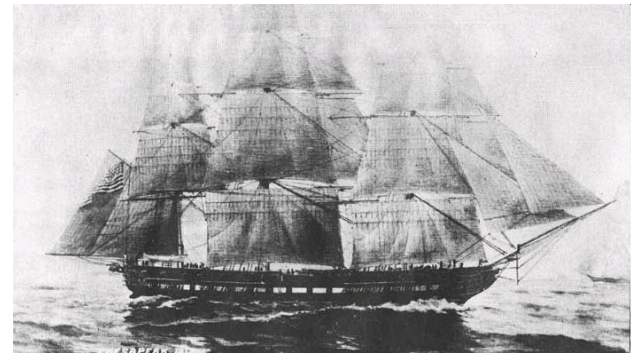
Carronade on the spar  
deck of *Constitution*



USS Constitution, Boston Harbor

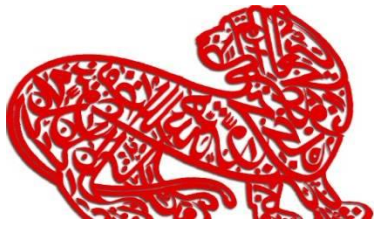


USS Frigate Essex, 1799



USS Chesapeake, 1799

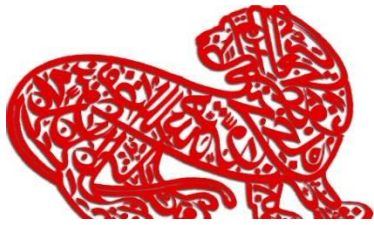
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# British performance in War of 1812

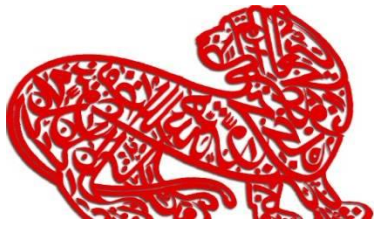
- ❑ We need be careful not to see War of 1812 as evidence of US military superiority over British
  - ❑ Britain would have been a much more formidable enemy if it has not been engaged in Napoleonic wars
  - ❑ Britain also had contempt for small US navy
  - ❑ Britain didn't take account of the threat from American privateers
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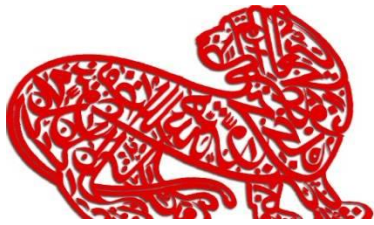
# British impact on US economy

- ❑ While British blockaded East coast, they left New England alone to encourage their disaffection with war
  - ❑ US unable to protect its shores except areas around large cities
  - ❑ British could raid at will and seize provisions
  - ❑ The British were especially effective in blockading and raiding farms along the Chesapeake Bay
  - ❑ Many slaves helped the British seize goods and many sought refuge on British ships
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# Summary comments

- ❑ War of 1812 resulted in a stalemate as neither Great Britain nor the US made significant gains
  - ❑ War was an economic loss for all parties
  - ❑ After end of War of 1812 and successful conclusion of Second Barbary War, US and Britain realized war between them not beneficial
  - ❑ War certainly enhanced US naval technology and made America *bona fide* world naval power
  - ❑ War can be seen as the “Second War of Independence”
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