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Outrage over Impressment

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Author: John Adams

Date: 1807

Annotation: Outrage over the British practice of impressment reached a fever pitch in 1807, when the British man-of-war Leopard fired three broadsides at the U.S. naval frigate Chesapeake, which had refused to stop at the order of the Leopard's commander. The blasts killed three American sailors and wounded eighteen more. British authorities then boarded the American ship and removed four sailors, only one of whom was a British subject.

The country clamored for war. Even some Federalists joined in the anti-British outcry. Said one, "Without substantial reparation for the crying offense against our honor, rights and independence, we must go to war." "Never," wrote President Jefferson, "since the battle of Lexington have I seen this country in such a state of exasperation."

In this letter, former President Adams discusses the clamor for war and the irony of Americans, who were unconcerned about fugitive slaves, being almost obsessively concerned about fugitive British sailors. Note how Adams parodies the voice of "a zealous Republican," attacking, as he was constantly attacked, a "Monarchical, Anti-republican administration."

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War? or No War? That is the question. Our Monarchical, Anti-republican administration conceal from us, the People, all that Information which I a zealous Republican was always prompt to communicate.... If an express stipulation is demanded...that our Flag on board Merchant as well as Ships of War shall protect all British subjects; Deserters from their Navy and all others, I will apprehend the English will not agree to it.... Prudence would dictate that our government should forbid all its Naval offices to recruit a Deserter from any Nation, in any case; and if the President has not the power to enact it, Congress should enact it. But our People have such a Predilection for Runaways of every description except Runaway Negroes that I suppose Congress would think it too unpopular to abridge this right of man. How we will get out of this Scrape I know not...tho' I carry the Principle by the Law of Nations, to as great an extent as Mr. Jefferson does. If the English fly into a Passion and with or without declaring War Seize every ship and Cargo we have at Sea, I don't believe our present Congress would declare War against them. I am sure they cannot consistently, with their avowed system...defend Nothing but our Farms....

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