

(1) <http://militaryhistory.about.com/od/navalbattles16001800/p/quasiwar.htm>

## NAVAL WAR (QUASI-WAR) WITH FRANCE

An undeclared war between the United States and France, the Quasi-War was the result of disagreements over treaties and America's status as a neutral in the Wars of the French Revolution. Fought entirely at sea, the Quasi-War was largely a success for the fledgling US Navy as its vessels captured numerous French privateers and warships, while only losing one of its vessels. By late 1800, attitudes in France shifted and hostilities were concluded by the Treaty of Mortefontaine.

### Dates:

The Quasi-War was officially fought from July 7, 1798, until the signing of the Treaty of Mortefontaine on September 30, 1800. French privateers had been preying on American shipping for several years prior to the beginning of the conflict.

### Causes:

Principle among the causes of the Quasi-War was the signing of the Jay Treaty between the United States and Great Britain in 1794. While largely a commercial agreement, the French viewed the treaty as a violation of 1778 Treaty of Alliance with the American colonists. This feeling was enhanced by the perception that the United States was favoring Britain, despite having declared neutrality in the ongoing conflict between the two nations. Shortly after the Jay Treaty took effect, the French began seizing American ships trading with Britain and, in 1796, refused to accept the new US minister in Paris.

### The XYZ Affair:

Tensions heightened in April 1798, when President John Adams reported to Congress on the XYZ Affair. The previous year, in an attempt to prevent war, Adams sent a delegation to Paris to negotiate peace between the two nations. Upon arriving in France, the delegation was told by three French agents, referred to in reports as X, Y, and Z, that in order to speak to Foreign Minister Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, they would have to pay a large bribe, provide a loan for the French war effort, and Adams would have to apologize for anti-French statements. Refusing to comply, the delegation departed and returned home.

### Active Operations Begin:

Announcement of the XYZ Affair unleashed a wave of anti-French sentiment across the country. Congress authorized Adams to expand the navy as French privateers continued to capture American merchant ships. On July 7, 1798, Congress rescinded all treaties with France and the US Navy was ordered to seek out and destroy French warships and privateers operating against American commerce. Consisting of approximately thirty ships, the US Navy began patrols along the southern coast and throughout the Caribbean. Success came quickly, with USS *Delaware* capturing the privateer *La Croyable* off New Jersey on July 7.

### The War at Sea:

As over 300 American merchantmen had been captured by the French in the previous two years, the US Navy protected convoys and searched for the French. Over the next two years, American vessels posted an incredible record against enemy privateers and warships. During the conflict USS *Enterprise* captured eight privateers and liberated eleven American merchant ships, while USS *Experiment* had similar success. On May 11, 1800, Commodore Silas Talbot, aboard USS *Constitution*, ordered his men to cut out a privateer from Puerto Plata. Led by Lt. Isaac Hull, the sailors took the ship and spiked the guns in the fort.

## **Truxtun & the Frigate USS Constellation:**

The two most noteworthy battles of the conflict involved the 38-gun frigate USS *Constellation*. Commanded by Thomas Truxtun, *Constellation* sighted the 36-gun French frigate *L'Insurgente* on February 9, 1799. The French ship closed to board, but Truxtun used *Constellation's* superior speed to maneuver away, raking *L'Insurgente* with fire. After a brief fight, Capt. M. Barreaut surrendered his ship to Truxtun. Almost a year later, on February 2, 1800, *Constellation* encountered the 52-gun frigate *La Vengeance*. Fighting a five-hour battle at night, the French ship was pummeled, but was able to escape in the darkness.

## **The One American Loss:**

During the entire conflict, the US Navy only lost one warship to enemy action. This was the captured privateer schooner *La Croyable* which had been purchased into the service and renamed USS *Retaliation*. Sailing with USS *Montezuma* and USS *Norfolk*, *Retaliation* was ordered to patrol the West Indies. On November 20, 1798, while its consorts were away on a chase, *Retaliation* was overtaken by the French frigates *L'Insurgente* and *Volontaire*. Badly outgunned, the schooner's commander, Lt. William Bainbridge, had no choice but to surrender. The ship was recaptured the following June by USS *Merrimack*.

## **Peace:**

In late 1800, the independent operations of the US Navy and the British Royal Navy were able to force a reduction in the activities of French privateers and warships. This coupled with changing attitudes in the French revolutionary government, opened the door for renewed negotiations. Signed on September 30, 1800, the Treaty of Mortefontaine ended hostilities between the US and France, as well as terminated all previous agreements and established trade ties between the nations. During the course of the fighting, the new US Navy captured 85 French privateers, while losing approximately 2,000 merchant vessels.

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On February 6, 1778, during the Revolutionary War, the United States and France entered into a Treaty of Alliance signed by Benjamin Franklin, the Comte de Vergennes and others. Also known as the Franco-American Alliance, it set up a military alliance between the two nations, and aided the Americans in their cause against the British.

### **Tensions with France Flare Over the Jay Treaty**

In 1793, war between England and France broke out. A year later, John Jay negotiated a treaty with Great Britain that increased trade between the nations, resolved several points of contention between the nations and averted war. The French and Americans were already at odds over the United States' refusal to continue paying its debt to France in the wake of the French Revolution. The Americans believed the debt was payable to the monarchy of France, not the Republic. While the Jay Treaty resolved issues with Britain, it created new tensions with France.

### **Party Politics and the Rift Between Adams and Jefferson**

On March 4, 1797, John Adams took office as President. Prior to the inauguration, Adams, a Federalist, wanted to send either Vice President Thomas Jefferson, a Republican, to negotiate with the French. Adams decided that it would be unwise to send the Vice President, as he was next in line for the Presidency. He then settled on a plan to send two men, Elbridge Gerry and James Madison, to join the U.S. Minister to France, Charles C. Pinckney in Europe and carry on the negotiations with the French. Unfortunately, the plan met with resistance from Washington, High Federalists and members of Adams' cabinet. They found Madison unacceptable, but Adams told the cabinet that he would not be swayed by party politics. In response, Secretary of the Treasury Oliver Wolcott threatened to resign. Later, Jefferson informed Adams that Madison had refused the appointment. Between this and Adams' failure, in Jefferson's eyes, to stand up to the members of his party, a rift was created between the two Founding Fathers that would last for many years to come.

### **XYZ Affair Leads to Anti-French Sentiment**

Soon after, word came that Pinckney had been rejected by the French government. He left France, afraid that he would be arrested and went to the Netherlands. There he waited for instructions from the new President. Eventually, John Marshall was chosen in place of Madison to join Gerry and Pinckney.

At the end of 1797, Adams addresses Congress, and made it clear that there was a need "to place our country in a suitable posture of defense." Then in the Spring of 1798, he told Congress of the XYZ Affair. This involved the French Foreign Minister, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, sending agents to meet with Pinckney, Gerry and Marshall. The agents made demands and set conditions for negotiation, which Pinckney flatly denied, saying "No, no, not a sixpence." Marshall and Pinckney returned home, and announcement of the Affair unleashed a wave of anti-French sentiment. This led to the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts, a controversial set of four bills that were intended to keep foreigners living in the United States from having an influence on American opinions.

## **Founding the United States Navy and Buildup to War**

As the slogan "Millions for defense, but not once cent for tribute" became the rallying cry of the Federalists, Congress commissioned 1,000 privateers to defend against French hostilities, and established the United States Navy on April 30, 1798. By May, the sloop *Ganges* was guarding the coast between Long Island and Chesapeake and was joined the next month by the *Constellation* and the *United States*. On July 7, 1778, Congress rescinded all treaties with France. The same day, the USS *Delaware* captured the French privateer *La Croyable* off the shores of New Jersey. Two days later, Congress authorized American warships to attack French vessels.

## **Naval Conflicts in the Atlantic and Caribbean**

With a fleet of about 25 ships, the U.S. Navy patrolled the coast down through the Caribbean, looking for French ships. The most famous battles involved the frigate USS *Constellation*, a 38-gun ship commanded by Thomas Truxton. The first battle occurred on February 1, 1799 and involved the 36-gun French frigate *L'Insurgente*. The French attempted to board the *Constellation*, but Truxton was able to maneuver away and fire on the *L'Insurgente*, leading to the French surrender. Almost a year later, on February 2, 1800, *Constellation* engaged the 52-gun frigate *La Vengeance*. The *Constellation* pounded the French ship for five hours, but the French were able to escape under the cover of the night.

In the entire conflict, the Americans only lost one ship, the USS *Retaliation*. The *Retaliation* was the re-christened *La Croyable*, which had been captured from the French in 1778. The ship was under the command of Lt. William Bainbridge and on patrol in the West Indies with the USS *Montezuma* and USS *Norfolk*. The *Retaliation* was overtaken by two French frigates, *L'Insurgente* and *Volontaire*, on November 20, 1798. Bainbridge found himself outgunned and surrendered. The following June, the *Retaliation* was recaptured by the USS *Merrimack*.

In all, the new United States Navy captured 85 French vessels, and approximately 2,000 merchant vessels were lost.

## **Treaty of Mortefontaine Brings Peace with France**

On November 9, 1799, Napoleon's coup in France marked a change in the direction of French politics and policy. Soon after, word came to President Adams from William Vans Murray and John Quincy Adams that France wanted to negotiate. The President dispatched official envoys to France. On September 30, 1800, the Treaty of Mortefontaine was signed, ending the hostilities of the undeclared war. The Treaty terminated all previous agreements and reestablished trade ties between the two nations.