

for inciting Mott to shoot the big gun. But Mott, who did the actual shooting that killed two men, was sentenced to a public flogging and ten years in prison.

The case did not end there, however. In October 1808, immediately after the trial of the *Black Snake* smugglers, Vermont voters went to the polls, where they showed their opposition to the embargo by ousting their Jeffersonian Republican governor and electing a Federalist.

ANTI-EMBARGO FERVOR

Before the embargo, Britain and France had been happy to do business with American merchants. Now, if they could not get flour, lumber, and other goods from the United States, they could find it elsewhere. For Napoleon, virtually all of Europe was his supermarket, and with the Royal Navy guarding the seas, English merchants could import goods from almost any corner of the world.

Jefferson imagined, however, that one place would be especially vulnerable to the American embargo—the British colonies in the West Indies. For decades the colonists in the Caribbean had relied upon regular American shipments of flour, salted meat, and other provisions that they could not produce in sufficient quantities for themselves. If the West Indies were suddenly cut off, they would appeal to Great Britain for help, and the best thing the crown could do, from Jefferson's perspective, was to promise to respect American neutrality. Once that promise had been made, American trade goods would flow again, and the people of the West Indies would not starve. In thinking through this scenario, however, Jefferson had failed to anticipate "leakages" by American smugglers.

In late December 1807, when word of the embargo reached the West Indies, the islanders panicked and began hoarding food supplies. The price of a barrel of flour, \$8.25 before the embargo, soared to \$40, with comparable inflation in the prices of cornmeal and salt. The panic did not last long, thanks to American smugglers, who, in January and February of 1808, slipped out of their harbors and made for the West Indies, with the holds of their ships crammed with food that they would sell at the new, sky-high prices.

A revenue collector in Philadelphia informed Albert Gallatin, secretary of the treasury, that from his port alone thousands of barrels of flour had headed to the Caribbean. Another revenue collector in Massachusetts complained that the bays and inlets of Cape Cod had become major launching points for ships smuggling goods to the British colonies. Because of these smugglers, the revenue collector said, the markets and storehouses of the British West Indies were "glutted with provisions" from New England. It is estimated that in New England alone, hundreds of ship owners were involved in smuggling.

To enforce the embargo, Jefferson ordered four American war ships, the *Hornet*, *Wasp*, *Argus*, and the unlucky *Chesapeake*, to patrol the sea lanes to the

West Indies. Rather than risk a confrontation with the U.S. Navy, the smugglers took their goods across the Atlantic to Europe instead. Meanwhile, as economic depression spread across the United States, angry public demonstrations erupted in the streets of the leading seaport towns, with crowds singing old Sons of Liberty songs from the 1770s. Anti-embargo fervor was so widespread that in Massachusetts, when forty people accused of violating the embargo were arraigned before a grand jury, the jurors refused to indict any of them.

By the time of the presidential election in November 1808, it was obvious to everyone—except the president himself—that Jefferson's embargo had become a national farce. On March 1, 1809, three days before Jefferson was scheduled to leave office, Congress repealed the Embargo Act. In an attempt to save face, the Jeffersonian Republicans—the majority party in Congress at the time—passed a Non-Intercourse Act that permitted American merchants to trade with anyone they liked, except the British and the French. But the Non-Intercourse Act proved to be no more effective than the discredited Embargo Act.

RUINED FORTUNES Jefferson had convinced himself that the American public would endure any economic hardship imposed by the embargo out of a sense of patriotism. They might have, if Jefferson had gone to the people and explained his reasons for imposing the embargo. In what historian Merrill D. Peterson has described as “a critical failure of leadership,” Jefferson never published an open letter or made a major address before Congress regarding his embargo policy. Consequently the farmers, manufacturers, ship owners, merchants, and sailors who suffered most from the embargo blamed Jefferson for all their troubles, and the public looked upon the embargo as a high-handed intrusion of the federal government that was ruining their personal prosperity. From the public's point of view, Jefferson's revenue men were bullies, and the smugglers were heroes. Also, it did not escape the people's notice that the government's increasing penalties for violating the embargo and other attempts at enforcement were not exactly consistent with the president's political principles.

During the fifteen months the embargo was in effect, Britain and France did not experience enough economic hardship to make any of the concessions Jefferson expected the embargo would pry out of them. In the United States, however, the embargo strangled the economy. Treasury receipts dwindled, agricultural prices dropped—which was a consequence particularly harsh for the southern states—and many family fortunes and private businesses were ruined. For example, in Massachusetts by 1808 four-fifths of all merchants and others involved in import-export businesses were bankrupt or impoverished. In mid-1808 in Salem, a port that before the embargo had brought in 5 percent of the



AMONG ORDINARY AMERICAN CITIZENS, THE COMMON, DERISIVE TERM FOR PRESIDENT JEFFERSON'S EMBARGO WAS "O-GRAB-ME," WHICH IS "EMBARGO" SPELLED BACKWARDS.

annual revenue of the United States, a soup kitchen opened to feed the destitute; approximately 1,200 hungry men, women, and children came every day for the free meal. Little wonder that throughout New England, the region most involved in international commerce, there was open talk of seceding from the Union. The embargo also created a new class of criminals through its unintended encouragement of smuggling. The most damaging effect for Jefferson personally was that the embargo tarnished his reputation as the enemy of centralized government and the champion of the common people. As Jefferson prepared to leave the White House, the sixty-five-year-old president said, "Never did a prisoner, released from his chains, feel such relief as I shall on shaking off the shackles of power."

The Embargo Act had accomplished nothing, aside from plunging the United States into an economic depression. It certainly did not resolve America's quarrel with Britain over the impressment of sailors and the seizure of ships and cargo. And because Jefferson had not settled these issues, the United States moved a step closer to another war against the British.