Jonathan Roberts and the "War Hawk" Congress of 1811-1812

Jonathan Roberts, Jr. took his seat in the United States House of Representatives on November 4, 1811. A Montgomery County farmer with broad intellectual interests, Roberts (1771-1854) had served in the Pennsylvania Assembly from 1799 to 1802 and in the State Senate from 1807 to 1811. As a member of the Pennsylvania legislature, he had exhibited a marked sense of independence, a strong animosity toward England, and an ardent devotion to the principles of Republicanism. In the autumn of 1810 he was chosen, together with Robert Brown and William Rodman, to represent the congressional district containing Bucks, Montgomery, Northampton, Wayne and Luzerne Counties. His election over the Federalist William Lattimore was part of a Republican sweep in Pennsylvania, with the supporters of Jefferson and Madison winning seventeen of the eighteen congressional seats in contests that aroused little public interest and enthusiasm. At the age of forty, Roberts, a Quaker, was one of the younger members of the Pennsylvania delegation.

The Congress that Roberts entered would be preoccupied with the question of American foreign policy. Since the resumption of the European war in 1803, Great Britain and France, engaged in a life-or-death struggle, had committed innumerable violations of American neutral rights. Britain was probably the principal trans-
gressor, with its Orders-in-Council, paper blockades, impressments of American seamen and activities among the Northwest Indian tribes. Presidents Jefferson and Madison had resorted to economic coercion to compel the European belligerents to respect American rights, but the Embargo Act of 1807 and the Nonintercourse Act of 1809 had to be abandoned before they could achieve the desired results because they defied effective enforcement and injured the American economy. In May 1810 a frustrated Congress had passed Macon’s Bill Number 2 which reopened trade with Great Britain and France. If either belligerent revoked its obnoxious measures against American commerce, however, the United States would reimpose a policy of nonintercourse against the other nation. Seizing this opportunity, Napoleon had indicated, through his Foreign Minister, that France would revoke the Berlin and Milan Decrees on November 1, 1810, insofar as they affected American neutral shipping. President Madison accepted the French announcement at face value even though it was laced with conditions. England refused to rescind its Orders on the ground that France was still capturing American ships, and Congress in February 1811 passed a nonintercourse act restricting trade with Britain. Subsequent negotiations between James Monroe, the Secretary of State, and Augustus J. Foster, the British Minister to the United States, failed to alter the situation. Hence, by the fall of 1811 many Americans had reached the conclusion that any further submission to the Orders-in-Council would result in national dishonor and disgrace. 3

One day after the opening of the Twelfth Congress, President Madison sent his Third Annual Message to the legislators. In the address the Chief Executive, who, unlike many members of the Republican majority in the lower chamber, now believed that war was inevitable, accused Great Britain of "hostile inflexibility in trampling on rights which no independent nation can relinquish," and urged Congress to put the United States into "an armor and attitude demanded by the crisis, and corresponding with the national spirit and expectations." The House referred Madison’s message to the Foreign Relations Committee chaired by Peter Porter of New York. For his part, Roberts was pleased with the annual address, which, in his view, "is as important as could have been anticipated," but he was not sure that Congress possessed sufficient resolve to act favorably upon it. Writing to his older brother Matthew, he complained that "The House wants men to take the lead" and that "there [is] a monstrous tardiness toward business here partly from a willingness to protract the opinion and partly from an unwillingness to broach the mighty question..." In fact, Roberts' criticism of Congress was somewhat unjustified, for the Republicans, motivated by considerations of national honor and party expediency, were gradually moving in November toward a consensus in support of hostilities with Great Britain. Furthermore, the Foreign Relations Committee was hard at work on a series of military recommendations. Late in the month, on November 29, 1811, it presented the House with a report containing resolutions to bring the regular army to full strength, to recruit an additional force of 10,000 troops, to raise 50,000 volunteers, to approve drafts of state militia, to outfit all navy vessels, and to arm merchant ships. Now Roberts was satisfied. The Committee’s proposals, he believed, “will go into effect


5 For analyses of the message see Brant, James Madison: The President, 356 ff., and Perkins, Prologue to War, 296 ff.

5 Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, Nov. 9, 1811, Jonathan Roberts Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP). Unless otherwise noted, all letters cited are from this collection.


and they must speedily lead to peace or war.” Roberts did not serve on the Foreign Relations Committee, but he was named to an ad hoc committee. Under the chairmanship of the eccentric John Randolph of Virginia, this committee was “to inquire into the expenditure of Public money” by the Army and Navy Departments. As part of his duties for the committee, Roberts visited the Navy Yard, where he saw “the hulks of three or four frigates built in federal times out of bad materials rotting here in the mud.” The “waste of money” in the Navy Department, Roberts told his brother, was “hardly conceivable.” Like many other Republicans, he saw the maintenance of a navy as a pernicious contribution to the public debt. Roberts’ experiences on this committee would undoubtedly influence his later stand on the expansion of the navy.

In early December the House of Representatives discussed the proposals of the Foreign Relations Committee, and Roberts used the occasion to deliver his first congressional speech. Taking the floor on the 13th, after many of the more prominent members of Congress had expressed their views, the Pennsylvanian praised the report of the committee as “the result of much and wise deliberation.” At this point, he declared, the House had to choose between “a vigorous preparation for resistance” or “unconditional submission” to the Orders-in-Council. Not only would the latter produce dire consequences for the American economy, but it would also “break the spirit of our citizens, and make them infidels in the principle of self-government.” Hence, Roberts associated the defense of American rights with the survival of republican institutions in the United States. Although he did not expect a peaceful settlement of the Anglo-American crisis, the freshman Congressman allowed for the possibility of a solution short of war. “While we are seriously preparing to meet the worst,” he stated, “we shall hold ourselves ready . . . to accept an honorable and safe accommodation of differences

8 Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, Nov. 30, 1811.
9 Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, Dec. 8, 1811.
10 Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, Nov. 25, 1811.
11 Ibid.
to the last moment.” Yet, he would support war if “accommodation does not take place before the time preparations are made for an appeal to arms.” In the event of hostilities, Roberts argued, the United States should quickly strike a blow at Britain by launching an attack upon Canada. He ended his remarks with the assertion that the federal government under the Constitution possessed sufficient power and determination to conduct a war successfully. Unfortunately, Roberts did not receive much public credit for his oratorical effort. Two of the country’s leading newspapers, the National Intelligencer and the Democratic Press, printed his speech, but they mistakenly attributed it to General Abner Lacock, another first term Pennsylvania Representative.

After two weeks of debate, the House of Representatives approved the proposals of the Foreign Relations Committee by decisive margins. Roberts joined with the majority in support of the first five resolutions, but he voted against the sixth, which authorized the arming of merchant vessels. Such a step, he thought, would amount to a premature declaration of war. Furthermore, it would mean that the federal government was surrendering its power over war and peace to private American citizens. Only a few Republicans shared Roberts’ view on this matter, and the lower chamber adopted the final resolution, 97 to 22.

Congress soon encountered major difficulties as it attempted to translate the resolutions into legislation. Madison supported an additional army of 10,000 men for three years, but William Branch Giles of Virginia, a Republican foe of the President, persuaded the Senate to approve a bill raising 25,000 men for five years. Giles clearly intended to embarrass Madison, since an army of that size, if it could be recruited, would require burdensome new taxes. Roberts initially opposed the increase as unnecessary and later accused Giles of trying “to quash the war purpose.” When the

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15 Perkins, Prologue to War, 360; Glyndon G. Van Deusen, The Life of Henry Clay (Boston, 1937), 79.
House took up Giles' proposal in late December, many of the Republicans who wanted a firm policy toward England, including Speaker of the House Henry Clay, decided to push the larger army on the President. Giles' army bill, with several important amendments, passed the lower chamber 94 to 34. For some reason, Roberts altered his earlier position and cast his vote in favor of the bill. The Senate quickly rejected the amendments, and, after a heated debate, the House agreed to drop them. Roberts had spoken against the withdrawal of the amendments, but he voted for it, probably to prevent further delay in the adoption of a military program. Hence, the bill to raise an additional army passed as Giles had framed it, and President Madison signed it into law on January 11, 1812.

Once the House had completed work on the army legislation, it turned to a bill, introduced in late December, to authorize the President to accept up to 50,000 volunteers. The principal issue in the ensuing debate involved the constitutionality of using the volunteers for service on foreign soil. Roberts played an active role in the discussion on this question. Speaking on January 15, he supported a suggestion by Peter Porter of New York to enact explicit legislation to permit the President to employ volunteers beyond the national boundaries. Roberts insisted that the use of the volunteers was "a matter of executive discretion," but he argued that it would be "best to take the sense of the House on . . . whether this force could, or could not be marched out of the United States." Accordingly, he proposed an amendment declaring that the volunteer force "shall perform duty at any place in which the army may be directed to act by the proper authority." The next day, however, he withdrew the amendment because he did not want "to embarrass the passage of the bill." Then the House approved the volunteer force even though the constitutional question remained unresolved.

The disputes over the additional army and the volunteer force

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17 *Annals of Congress*, 617. The amendments provided that the officers of six regiments should not be commissioned until three-fourths of the privates had been enlisted, that the officers should continue in commission during such term only as the President should judge requisite, that no general, field or staff officer should receive pay until called into service, and that the President be permitted to appoint officers in the recess of the Senate.


19 *Annals of Congress*, 792-793.

proved to be mild in comparison with the controversy over naval expansion. Indeed, as one historian has written, the bill introduced by Langdon Cheves of South Carolina to build twelve ships-of-the-line and twenty frigates "wrought the first split in the ranks of the War Hawks and revealed, if only briefly, a fundamental divergence of aims." One of the more vociferous opponents of Cheves' measure was Jonathan Roberts, who reported to his brother that "some of the leaders of the Republican party had become Navy mad." In a lengthy and passionate speech on January 21, the Pennsylvania Congressman pointed out that it would be "impossible" to get any of the proposed new ships "ready for the war about to commence." Besides, the naval program would arouse the jealousy of Great Britain, would add "aggregated millions" to the public debt and would jeopardize civil liberties in the United States. The only effective way to damage Great Britain in a war, Roberts continued, was through a land attack on her possessions in North America. He concluded his remarks by warning his colleagues that "from Naval power have flown the most copious streams of human misery." Ultimately, on January 27, the House defeated Cheves' bill 62 to 59. Fifty Republicans who would later vote in favor of war with England followed the traditional doctrines of their party and rejected the naval construction program. Roberts was pleased with both the results of the vote and the response to his speech. The *National Intelligencer* and other papers printed his oration, and a number of Pennsylvania politicians expressed their support of his position.

The movement toward war lost some of its momentum with the defeat of the navy bill. The resulting congressional inactivity convinced some Federalists that there was now only a faint prospect of a declaration of war against Great Britain. On the other hand, Roberts still believed, despite the halt in military preparations, that

22 Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, Jan. 25, 1812.
hostilities were inevitable. "There seems to be no disposition to release our war measures," he observed, but "everyone would be exceedingly glad to remain at peace." Yet Roberts had little hope that England would make the concessions necessary to prevent a war. He thought that Congress should refrain from a declaration of war until the return of the U. S. S. *Hornet*, which had left for France in December to bring accounts of the report of the Foreign Relations Committee and to gather information about British and French policy toward the United States. The next news from Europe, Roberts wrote, "will decide the question of war or peace—and decide too . . . the length of the session."  

The lull in Congress ended temporarily when Ezekiel Bacon of Massachusetts, the Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, presented a series of resolutions designed to raise money for a war against Great Britain. Introduced on February 17, the proposals included a loan of eleven million dollars, a doubling of import duties, a direct tax of three million dollars on the states, a stamp tax, an impost on salt, excise taxes on sugar and carriages, and taxes on distillers, wine sellers, tavernkeepers and vendors of foreign goods. To ease voter resentment, Bacon recommended a postponement in the implementation of the new taxes until war actually began.  

This idea appealed to Roberts and several other Republican members of Congress. With little debate, the House of Representatives quickly passed the resolutions for a loan and higher import duties. The internal taxes encountered greater difficulty, however. Unlike some of his colleagues, Roberts recognized the need to prepare the country financially as well as militarily despite the political risks involved. "I believe I shall vote [the internal taxes]," he told his brother, "in which case it is very probable I shall be left at home on next election." Convinced that "we have no hope of peace but by vigorous and earnest preparations for war," the Pennsylvania Congressman supported all fourteen of Bacon's resolutions. On March 27, 1812, Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, Feb. 3, 1812.  

29 Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, Feb. 3, 1812; Perkins, Prologue to War, 363.  
30 Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, Feb. 25, 1812. Despite his pessimism he was re-elected and subsequently went on to the United States Senate.  
31 Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, Mar. 2, 1812.
the House approved the financial program with a number of Republican opponents of the taxes absenting themselves from the vote. By its action, the lower chamber served notice that it remained determined upon a war against Britain. Still, Bacon's resolutions were not laws, and the House later decided, at the urging of Roberts, to put off final action on the taxes until the next session of Congress.32

A few days after the House had adopted Bacon's resolutions, President Madison sent to Congress a series of documents pertaining to the activities of John Henry, a British agent. The papers showed that Sir James Craig, the Governor-General of Canada, had dispatched Henry to New England in 1808 to promote disunionist sentiment among the Federalists there. American reaction to the disclosures was swift and angry. A number of newspapers and Republicans now threatened England with immediate war if she did not make the appropriate concessions.33 The public excitement produced by Henry's reports was echoed in the letters that Jonathan Roberts received from friends and constituents.34 For his part, the Pennsylvania Congressman viewed the incident as "ample proof of the consummate perfidy and iniquity" of the British Government.35 The furor over the Henry Affair dissipated very quickly, however, once it became clear that the Madison Administration had paid a large sum of money for the documents and that the British spy had offered no evidence incriminating Federalist leaders.36

The remainder of March was rather quiet. This led some observers to conclude that Congress did not really intend to engage in war.37 Roberts thought otherwise. In letters to his brother, he reported that "we are expecting war as much as ever" and that the Republicans in the House still seemed "well disposed with a few exceptions" toward hostilities against England.38 Yet, Roberts had grave doubts

34 Edward Fox to Jonathan Roberts, Mar. 18, 1812; Joseph Burke to Jonathan Roberts, Mar. 20, 1812.
36 Perkins, Prologue to War, 371.
37 Ibid., 372-373.
38 Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, Mar. 21, 1812, Apr. 4, 1812.
about the military preparedness of the United States. The public had good reason to feel apprehensive about a conflict with Britain, he asserted, because “we shall have it... before we are ready” and “our enemy is long versed in the art of war.” Roberts blamed Secretary of War William Eustis for the lack of adequate military preparations. He was, the Pennsylvania Representative wrote, “a dead weight” whose “unfitness is apparent to everyone but himself and to himself... it will ever be a secret.”

In fact, although Roberts would probably not admit it, Congress had done little of substance to improve the military posture of the country.

At the beginning of April, President Madison, upon the recommendation of Republican leaders in the House, asked Congress in secret session to impose a general embargo for sixty days. The proposed ban on shipping and exports was designed to end the flow of supplies to British troops in the Iberian Peninsula, to clear the Atlantic Ocean of American vessels and to warn the country of the approach of war.

After the reading of the President’s brief message, Peter Porter introduced an embargo bill, and the House, with little debate, passed it 70 to 41. One day later, April 2, the Senate voted to extend the embargo from sixty to ninety days. The House accepted this change, and Madison signed the bill into law on April 4. Most Republicans, including Jonathan Roberts, viewed the embargo as the precursor of war. In early April Roberts told his brother that war would come no later than July 4, when the embargo expired. This was “the remotest period that a declaration of war can be put off to.”

The embargo embroiled Roberts in a bitter dispute with some of his constituents. Paschal Hollingsworth, a Federalist merchant from Philadelphia, drafted a letter on behalf of the millers of Easton and sent it to Roberts, William Rodman, and Robert Brown, the Representatives of that district. In the letter, dated April 6, Hollingsworth condemned the embargo as “very injurious” and predicted “inevitable ruin” if it was followed by a war. The millers, he pointed out,

39 Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, Mar. 27, 1812.
41 Ibid., 1597-1598.
42 Ibid., 1601-1614.
43 Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, Apr. 4, 1812.
did not consider the Orders-in-Council a sufficient cause for hostilities because the regulations "neither diminished their profits or their happiness." Rodman and Brown asked Roberts to respond to Hollingsworth's letter. In his reply, Roberts admitted that the embargo would produce "some private embarrassment." A resort to war without an embargo first, however, would "work greater evil" for American commerce would be "liable to ruinous depredations." If the embargo threatened the millers with undue hardship, he continued, it was because the Federalists had deluded them into thinking that the United States would not protect her national interests. Then, Roberts proceeded to defend the idea of a war against Great Britain. He reminded Hollingsworth that the federal government had failed to obtain a redress of grievances through negotiation or peaceful coercion. Under such circumstances, Roberts declared, the United States had "no choice but open war or submission to a doctrine of absolute recolonization." He ended his letter by telling the Federalist merchant that "we owe very much, if not entirely, our necessity to go to war to you and those who think like you... a belief on the part of Great Britain that she has many partisans in America who are able to divide and paralyze our councils... has invited and encouraged her aggressions."

The reply to Hollingsworth brought Roberts a great deal of attention and publicity. Most of the major newspapers in Pennsylvania published the Hollingsworth-Roberts correspondence, and the editor of the *National Intelligencer* described the exchange as a demonstration of "the weakness of federal sophistry in vivid contrast with the strength of republican truth and argument." For his effort, Roberts received letters of congratulation from President Madison and from Republicans in "distant states." Henry Clay, Nathaniel Macon, and other leading members of Congress added their commendations. The reaction amazed Roberts, who speculated on the

45 Jonathan Roberts to Paschal Hollingsworth, Apr. 11, 1812; Klein, "Memoirs," LXII, 231.
46 Quoted in Philadelphia Aurora, Apr. 20, 1812. See also Philadelphia Democratic Press, Apr. 20, 1812; Norristown Weekly Register, Apr. 29, 1812; Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, May 7, 1812.
reasons why his colleagues in the House were so impressed. "It must be clear little was expected of me," he wrote, "or surprise could not have been so great." Besides, the Pennsylvanian observed, "any evidence of a capacity to write in a mere farmer is so novel that it is greeted with the enthusiasm of novelty." The acclaim heaped upon Roberts gave him a new perception of his status in Congress. He told his brother in April that "My presence here is of some importance" and "I am beginning to feel myself in a highly responsible situation." Indeed, Roberts had risen from obscurity to prominence in a relatively short time.

With the adoption of the embargo bill, many members of Congress felt that the legislative preparations for war were complete. As a result, there was considerable sentiment in favor of an adjournment. Federalists and antiwar Republicans supported a recess in order to slow the movement toward war, while moderate Republicans welcomed an opportunity to ascertain the views of their constituents. Even some Republicans eager for war wanted an adjournment. On April 10 the House of Representatives approved a resolution for a recess by a margin of 72 to 40. Jonathan Roberts furnished one of the negative votes. Later, a joint committee of the House and Senate agreed to adjourn until May 18. This recommendation would probably have passed, but the Senate decided to extend the recess until June 8. To war-minded Republicans, such a long delay would create the impression that Congress was trying to avoid hostilities with Great Britain.

At this point Jonathan Roberts made his greatest contribution to the coming of the War of 1812. When the House of Representatives appeared inclined to accept the Senate bill, Roberts introduced, on April 25, an amendment which required the members of Congress to give up their pay and travel money during the recess. This would save the Treasury forty thousand dollars. The real purpose behind the amendment, however, was to prevent passage of the Senate bill, for Roberts believed that a recess would settle the "question of peace

48 Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, Apr. 23, 1812.
49 Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, Apr. 27, 1812.
50 Perkins, Prologue to War, 397.
52 Annals of Congress, 1338.
and war in favor of peace.” It would leave the President alone in a
time of crisis and “would have been taken as evidence of the inde-
cision of Congress and of an anti-warlike spirit in the public coun-
cils.” Roberts’ amendment precipitated a short but lively debate,
with David R. Williams of South Carolina leading the opposition.
Then the House, rather than approve the amendment, decided 62
to 55 to postpone indefinitely the matter of adjournment. By his
maneuver, Roberts averted a potentially “fatal check” to the move-
ment for war. Hence, he had good reason to describe his amendment
as an “artful stroke.”

Congress remained in session, but many of its members went
home to attend to their private affairs. President Madison had indi-
cated that he would request a declaration of war if the Hornet did
not bring news of the repeal of the Orders-in-Council. So Congress
dallied while it awaited the return of the warship. As May wore on,
Roberts became increasingly impatient. “We are on our oars,” he
wrote, “waiting the arrival of the moment when it shall be advisable
to take the ulterior measures.” The Pennsylvania Representative
was still convinced, though, that “Everything is verging fast to a
war.” Despite his confidence, Roberts expressed some apprehension
about the activities of the Federalists, who were busily engaged in a
petition campaign in the hope of blocking a declaration of war. “The
Tories are doing what they can,” he observed, and “if they are
allowed to proceed without check they may do mischief.” Finally,
on May 22, the Hornet reached the United States. The latest dis-
patches from Europe showed that England had not repealed the
Orders and that France continued to harass American commerce.
This led to a revival of the demand for a war with both nations.
Roberts preferred to ignore the transgressions of France at least until
the United States had satisfied her grievances against Great Britain.
“The weak and mad talk of fighting all the world,” he told his

53 Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, Apr. 27, 1812.
54 *Annals of Congress*, 1337-1342.
58 Jonathan Roberts to Matthew Roberts, May 7, 1812, May 18, 1812.
brother, "and we have some fears there are those who may back out of the war with England because we will not fight France too." Roberts conceded that the United States might ultimately have to declare war on France, but he did not want "to see our policy toward Britain affected at this moment by French aggression." Only England, he warned, would benefit from an American decision to wage war against both European powers. Clearly, the Administration shared Roberts' views.

On June 1 President Madison asked Congress to consider a war against Great Britain. Two days later John C. Calhoun, now the Chairman of the House Foreign Relations Committee, presented a bill declaring war on England. After the lower chamber had rejected three attempts at delay, it passed the measure 79 to 49. Pennsylvania, with sixteen of its eighteen Representatives supporting war, cast the largest single number of votes for Calhoun's bill. The division in the House followed party more than sectional lines, as most Republicans approved the bill and every Federalist opposed it. In all likelihood, Roberts echoed the sentiments of many of his Republican colleagues when he explained that he decided in favor of war because there appeared to be no acceptable alternative. "I cannot but think war with all its consequences," he wrote, "is now as in '76 better than a continuation of peace under the circumstances it must continue." The Senate discussed the war bill for almost two weeks and finally approved it on June 17 by the relatively narrow margin of 19 to 13. Madison signed it the next day. The War of 1812 had begun.

The first session of the Twelfth Congress came to an end in early July. Roberts returned to his home and family in Upper Merion Township on the 10th after an absence of eight months. In appreciation of his congressional service, the citizens of Montgomery County gave him a public dinner. The honor was well deserved,
for Roberts, an unknown when he entered the House in November 1811, had emerged from the session as one of the more important and respected members of Congress. He had expressed his views eloquently on a number of significant issues, and he had single-handedly prevented a recess that might have destroyed the war movement. Most of Roberts’ Republican constituents were apparently quite satisfied with his performance in the House, but many of the Federalists and Quakers in his district were rather displeased with his support of military preparedness and a war against England. Roberts’ voting record indicates, however, that his attachment to Republicanism was tempered somewhat by his spirit of independence. Ronald Hatzenbuehler’s analysis of thirty-three roll calls on foreign policy questions in the first session of the Twelfth Congress shows that Roberts joined a majority of the Republican members of the House on 81.5 percent of the votes. Under normal circumstances, this would be considered a high degree of party regularity. But the Republicans in the Twelfth Congress were unusually cohesive, and Roberts’ percentage ranks fifty-seventh among them in terms of party loyalty. Only thirty-two Republicans were less supportive of the positions of the party.

Over the last thirty years historians such as Bradford Perkins, Reginald Horsman, R. H. Brown and Ronald Hatzenbuehler, to name just a few, have modified drastically the traditional assumptions about the role, motivation, and composition of the so-called “War Hawks.” Some scholars have even questioned the existence of such a group. Horsman has identified fourteen and Hatzenbuehler eight “Hawks” in the House; neither includes Roberts in his list, largely because of the Pennsylvanian’s opposition to the expansion of the navy and to his stand on David R. Williams’ bill in January 1812 for the reorganization of the militia. In several other ways, Roberts does not conform to the traditional stereotype of a “Hawk.”

He did not enter Congress determined upon a war with Great Britain, and he viewed hostilities as a last resort preferable to continued submission. He had no desire to annex Canada and no interest whatsoever in Florida. His congressional district prospered despite the Orders-in-Council. Undoubtedly, Roberts was concerned about the prospects of his party in the upcoming elections and about the fate of republican institutions in the country, but his letters during the congressional session of 1811–1812 do not reveal any particular preoccupation with these matters. It appears, then, that Roberts supported war primarily to preserve the national honor of the United States.

University of Scranton

Raymond W. Champagne, Jr.

and

Philadelphia

Thomas J. Rueter