Jay’s Treaty

On the sea frontier, the British were eager to starve out the French West Indies, and naturally

expected the Americans to defend them. The commanders of the Royal Navy seized about 300 American merchant

ships, and forced many seamen into service on British vessels, and threw thousands of others into foul dungeons.

Jeffersonians argued that Americans should go into war with the British, while Hamilton saw it as a great threat to

his policies. Washington decided to send Chief Justice John Jay to London in 1794, to prevent war. Jeffersonians

were enraged that such a renowned federalist had been sent, and more so when he arrived back with his treaty.

Hamilton, fearful of war with Britain, secretly supplied the British with the details of America’s bargaining

strategy, and therefore Hamilton won few concessions. The British promised to evacuate the chain of posts on

US soil, and pay for damages for the seizures of American ships. However, Britain pledged nothing about future

seizures and impressments, or about supplying arms to the Indians. They forced Jay to give ground by binding

America to pay its debts still owed to British merchants from pre-revolutionary accounts. Jeffersonians were

enraged, as the North would collect damages for British seizures, while the Southern planters would have to pay

most of the pre-revolutionary debts.