John Randolph Opposes War

In opposition to the War Hawks stood an array of elected officials who opposed war against Britain on various grounds. Some were Federalists who suspected the Republicans of using the conflict to align the country with France, others feared the usurpation of power by the president at the expense of Congress; still others predicted certain defeat at the hands of the British military. One of the most prominent of the antiwar voices belonged to John Randolph of Roanoke, Virginia, who spoke passionately for peace from within the Republican ranks. His speech that appears below was delivered to Congress in December 1811; it is taken from The Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States ... 12th Cong., 1st sess. (Washington, 1853), 441, 445-47, 450, 454-55.

An insinuation had fallen from the gentleman from Tennessee, (Mr. Grundy.) that the late massacre of our brethren on the Wabash had been instigated by the British Government. Has the President given any such information? has the gentleman received any such, even informally, from any officer of this Government? Is it so believed by the Administration? He had cause to think the contrary to be the fact; that such was not their opinion. This insinuation was of the grossest kind-a presumption the most rash, the most unjustifiable. Show but good ground for it, he would give up the question at the threshold-he was ready to march to Canada. It was indeed well calculated to excite the feelings of the Western people particularly, who were not quite so tenderly attached to our red brethren as some modern philosophers; but it was destitute of any foundation, beyond mere surmise and suspicion.... Advantage had been taken of the spirit of the Indians, broken by the war which ended in the Treaty of Greenville. Under the ascendency then acquired over them, they had been pent up by subsequent treaties into nooks, straightened in their quarters by a blind cupidity, seeking to extinguish their title to immense wildernesses, for
which, (possessing, as we do already, more land than we can sell or use) we shall not have occasion, for half a century to come. It was our own thirst for territory, our own want of moderation, that had driven these sons of nature to desperation, of which we felt the effects.... This war of conquest, a war for the acquisition of territory and subjects, is to be a new commentary on the doctrine that Republics are destitute of ambition—that they are addicted to peace, wedded to the happiness and safety of the great body of their people. But it seems this is to be a holiday campaign—there is to be no expense of blood, or treasure, on our part—Canada is to conquer herself—she is to be subdued by the principles of fraternity. The people of that country are first to be seduced from their allegiance, and converted into traitors, as preparatory to the making them good citizens. Although he must acknowledge that some of our flaming patriots were thus manufactured, he did not think the process would hold good with a whole community. It was a dangerous experiment.... But is war the true remedy? Who will profit by it? Speculators—a few lucky merchants, who draw prizes in the lottery—commissaries and contractors. Who must suffer by it? The people. It is their blood, their taxes, that must flow to support it.... Mr. R. adverted to the defenceless state of our seaports, and particularly of the Chesapeake. A single spot only, on both shores, might be considered in tolerable security—from the nature of the port and the strength of the population—and that spot unhappily governed the whole State of Maryland. His friend, the late Governor of Maryland, (Mr. Lloyd) at the very time he was bringing his warlike resolutions before the Legislature of the State, was liable, on any night, to be taken out of his bed and carried off with his family, by the most contemptible picaroon. Such was the situation of many a family in Maryland and lower Virginia....
He called upon those professing to be Republicans to make good the promises held out by their Republican predecessors when they came into power - promises, which for years afterwards they had honestly, faithfully fulfilled. We had vaunted of paying off the national debt, of retrenching useless establishments; and yet had now become as infatuated with standing armies, loans, taxes, navies, and war, as ever were the Essex Junto. What Republicanism is this?

*John Randolph has a very different view. Why does he oppose war? Who gets the better of the argument?*