Armed Merchantmen and Privateers: Another Perspective On America's Quasi-War With France

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WE should greet the recent publication of Michael A. Palmer's study *Stoddert's War: Naval Operations During the Quasi-War With France* favorably.[1] The history of America's undeclared naval war with France is a subject which has been too long neglected by historians of America's naval past, and the renewed interest in these formative years of the U.S. Navy caused by Palmer's contribution of a modern naval history of the conflict is indeed welcome. The importance of this or any other naval history of this conflict cannot be denied, but a different perspective, an additional dimension, on the subject exists which such accounts fail to fully consider. To complement rather than to refute such studies, I suggest that the private operations of America's merchant marine during this conflict were equally important in nature and even more extensive in scope than the operations of the nation's fledgling navy.

The arming of American merchant ships is probably the least studied of the United States' defensive strategies during the Quasi-War with France in the late 1790s. Because historians, most notably Marshall Smelser,[2] have viewed the conflict's primary importance as providing the impetus for the permanent formation of the United States Navy, the role of armed merchant vessels in this conflict has tended to be overlooked. If America's Quasi-War gave birth to the American Navy, it does not necessarily follow that, despite the numerous successes of American warships in individual actions, the American Navy was, at that stage in its development, wholly adequate to fulfill its primary function of protecting American commerce. The inadequacy of the U.S. Navy during this stage of its infancy left the primary responsibility of defending American merchant ships upon merchant ships. Neither were these limited naval resources entirely devoted to the defense of American shipping. Despite the public claims of President John Adams and his Secretary of the Navy, Benjamin Stoddert, the role of the Navy was intended to be offensive rather than defensive, with the use of warships for convoy duty only a last resort. In the end, it fell to the merchant vessel, armed for its own defense, to perform the primary task of the war—to provide protection for American commerce on the high seas.

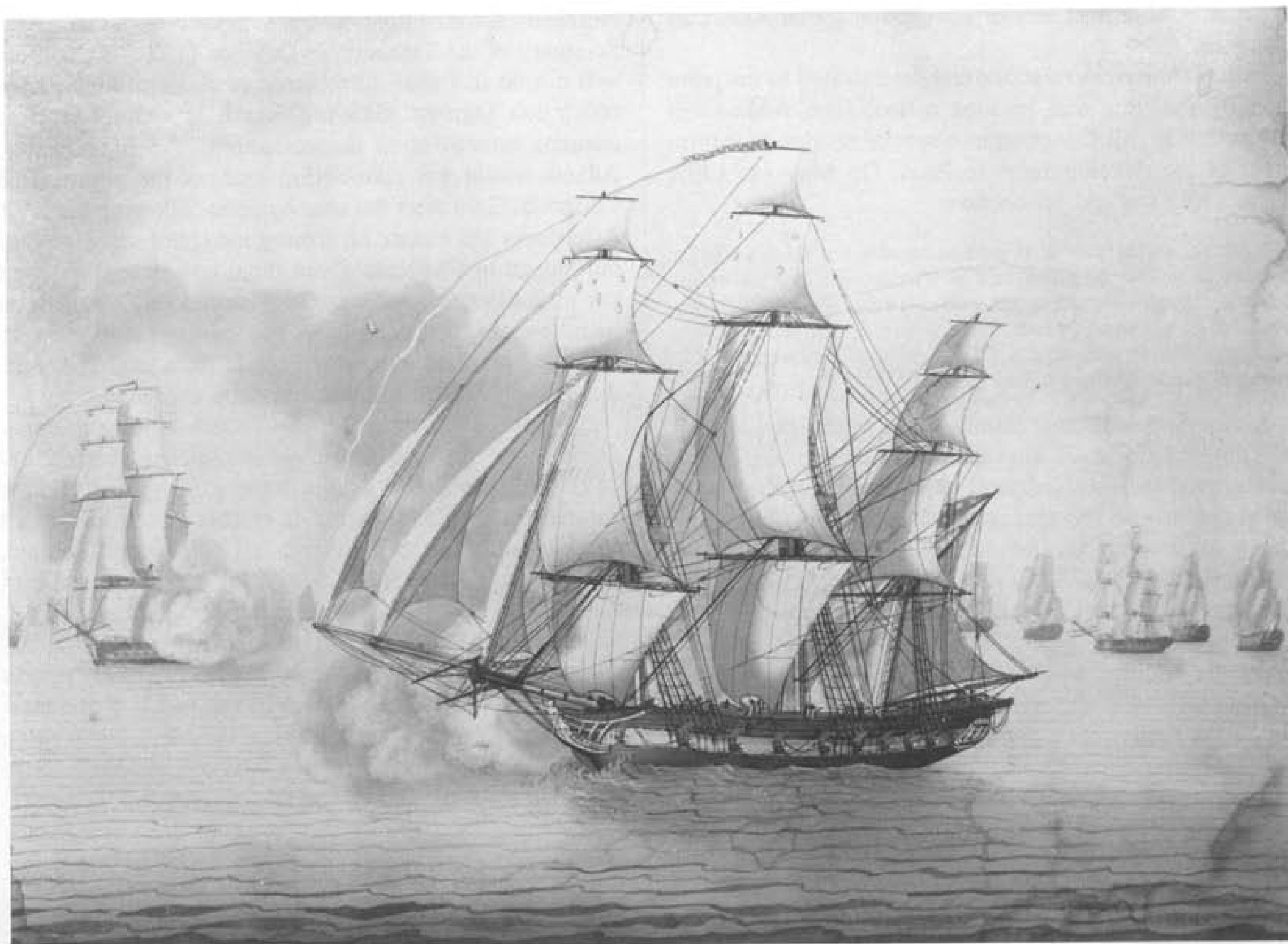
In a sense, the conflict which became the Quasi-War was merely the culmination of a series of events which marked a deterioration of Franco-American relations during the late 1790s. After the signing of Jay's Treaty with Britain in 1794-5, the French watched with increasing concern what they perceived to be America's growing support for Great Britain in its war with France. Gradually, the policies of the French government became increasingly antagonistic towards the United States. On July 2, 1796, the Executive Directory issued a decree which revised the French position toward neutral shipping and particularly towards American shipping. At a glance, the decree may have seemed innocent enough. It announced the French intention to treat neutral shipping, as Secretary of State Timothy Pickering later reported to Congress, "by the manner in which they suffer the English to treat them."[3] The consequences of this decree, however, were to prove far more grave than most suspected.

In practice, the act proved to be a disaster for American foreign trade. At Malaga and Cadiz on the Northern coast of Spain, the French consuls interpreted the decree to allow the seizure of American merchant ships in the strategic Straits of Gibraltar and to authorize their subse-

1. Michael A. Palmer, *Stoddert's War: Naval Operations During the Quasi-War with France, 1798-1801* (Columbia, S.C., 1987). See also Gardner W. Allen, *Our Naval War with France* (Boston, 1909), and William G. Anderson, "John Adams, the Navy, and the Quasi-War with France," *American Neptune* 30 (April 1970), pp. 117-132.

2. Marshall Smelser, *The Congress Founds the Navy, 1787-1798* (Notre Dame, In., 1959).

3. Martin P. Claussen, ed., *Administration of John Adams, 1797-1801, Part II: Text of Documents* (National State Papers of the United States, 1789-1817; Wilmington, Del., 1980), II, p. 14.



American ship *Mount Vernon* at Naples, 1799, engaging French merchantmen. Photo courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Salem.

quent condemnation for no more cause than being bound for a British port. Closer to home, matters were even worse. In the West Indies, "whose seas swarm with privateers and gun-boats," as one contemporary noted, the capture of American merchant vessels rapidly became a thriving local industry.[4] There ships and cargoes were seized and condemned in French colonial courts without the owner even being admitted to the proceedings to present the vessel's defense. On June 22, 1797, Secretary of State Pickering reported to Congress:

This seems to be done systematically, and for the obvious purpose of ensuring condemnations. By monstrous abuse in judicial proceedings, frauds and falsehoods, as well as flimsy and shameless pretexts, pass unexamined and uncontradicted, and are made the foundations of the sentences of condemnation.[5]

The extent of the French depredations against American commerce had clearly become intolerable. Between July 1796 and June 1797, French warships and privateers captured no fewer than 308 American merchant vessels.[6] To make matters worse, in May 1797, the Executive Directory of the French government failed to recognize the newly appointed American Ambassador, C. C. Pinckney, and instead presented the United States with a vague demand for redress of grievances. The insult to American national honor was clear. In all, French actions seemed

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15, 160-180.

to provide more than ample provocation for an American response.

Franco-American relations had deteriorated to the point that, by the time that he took office, John Adams felt compelled to call Congress into special session to inform them of the developments in Paris. On May 16, 1797, Adams told the special session:

> The refusal on the part of France to receive our minister is . . . to treat us neither as allies, nor as friends, nor as a sovereign State. . . . Such attempts ought to be repelled with the decision which shall convince France, and the world, that we are not to be miserable instruments of foreign influence; and regardless of national honor, character, and interest.[7]

Although Adams was committed to peace, he nonetheless advised Congress to prepare for war and went on to recommend the establishment of a permanent system of naval defense, an increase in the size of the regular army, and a revision of the laws regarding the organization, arming, and disciplining of the militia. Among these defensive measures, Adams suggested the arming of the nation's merchant vessels for their own defense.

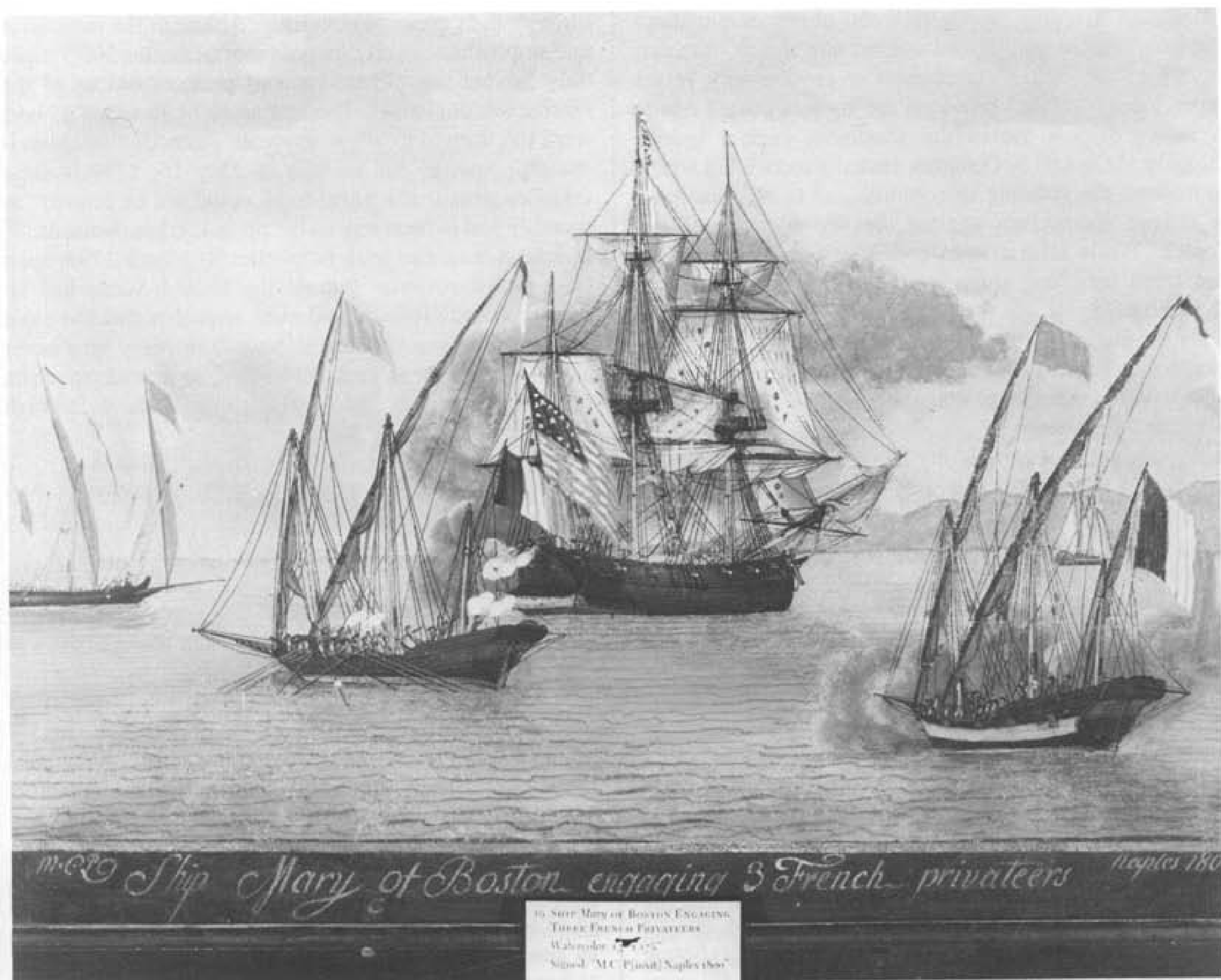
Adams' speech, however, failed to move Congress to authorize the arming of American merchant vessels. In fact, it had quite the opposite effect. On June 6, 1797, Benjamin Goodhue, a Salem, Massachusetts, merchant and Hamiltonian Federalist, introduced a bill to prohibit the arming of private ships in American ports. Although the bill was ostensibly intended to prohibit the arming of foreign warships and privateers, the bill nonetheless provided "that no merchant vessel, armed within the United States should be cleared out, destined to any foreign country, except the East Indies, until further regulations should be made on the subject by Congress."[8] Although it was intended to support Adams' policy on the arming of foreign privateers in American ports, the bill instead would have effectively eliminated the arming of American merchant vessels for their own protection. The bill was later amended to alleviate this flaw, but the session of Congress ended before the bill could be brought to a final vote and the matter was not pursued when Congress reconvened.[9]

While Congress remained inactive, the attacks upon American shipping continued, and Adams grew increasingly impatient with Congressional inactivity on the matter of arming merchant vessels. "We must unshackle our merchant ships," Adams wrote to Oliver Wolcott, his Secretary of the Treasury, in October 1797. "If Congress will not do it, I shall have scruples about continuing the restriction [against allowing merchant vessels to clear customs armed] upon the collectors."[10] Still, however, Adams would not take action without the approval of Congress. Only after the near hysteria following the XYZ Affair was the matter of arming merchant vessels again introduced in Congress. Even then, however, it required the prompting of Adams. On March 19, 1798, Adams withdrew the instructions to the customs collectors to restrain American merchant vessels from sailing armed. But Adams' action did not convince everyone.

Even at the height of the anti-French sentiment, opposition to the arming of American merchant vessels existed. Fears remained among some Republicans that the arming of American merchant vessels would lead to all out war with France. On April 2, 1798, Joseph Varnum, a Massachusetts Republican and an outspoken critic of the Adams administration, presented a petition to Congress from the residents of Milton, Massachusetts, expressing their alarm that the arming of merchant vessels would place the nation's peace in the hands of the masters of merchant ships, "many of whom," the petition stated, "were formerly British subjects, and who . . . still retain all their English prejudices against the French."[11] Neither was the town of Milton alone in its pro-French leanings. On the following day, Albert Gallatin presented to Congress a memorial from forty members of the Pennsylvania legislature opposing the arming of merchant ships, and on April 13, Varnum introduced a second petition, this time from Cambridge, Massachusetts, expressing its opposition as well. The public response, however, was insufficient to rally much support.[12]

Republican opposition was, in fact, disorganized, halfhearted, and ineffective in the face of the emotional anti-French tidal wave which overtook Congress. "A ship of a merchant is not less the property of the country than the house of a farmer," Harrison Otis, a Massachusetts Federalist, told the House during debates on April 20. "The sailor who ploughs the ocean is not less than the husbandman who ploughs the soil, . . . they are part of our public and private property which no man would feel authorized to abandon."[13] This view was apparently shared by others in Congress as well.

7. U.S. Presidents, *Messages of the Presidents of the United States* (Columbus, Oh., 1841), p. 85.
8. Claussen, *Admin. of John Adams*, pp. 273-275.
9. U.S., *Annals of Congress*, 5th Cong., 1st Sess., VII, pp. 22-35.
10. Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States* (Boston, 1850-1856), VIII, pp. 558-9.
11. U.S., *Annals of Congress*, 5th Cong., 1st Sess., VIII, p. 1367.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 1373, 1413.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 1488-1489.



Ship *Mary* of Boston engaging three French privateers off Malaga, March 8, 1799. From Knox, *Naval Documents,* Vol II. Photo courtesy of Peabody Museum of Salem.

In fact, such nationalist sentiments swept away the Republican opposition, and in the spring and summer of 1798, a flurry of bills to re-establish the navy and enhance the public defense were enacted. On March 27, Congress authorized the early completion of the three new frigates under construction and a month later approved the purchase or construction of twelve additional vessels. Ships were of little value without the authority to use them, but soon this oversight as well was corrected. On May 28, Congress authorized American naval vessels to take and capture "any armed vessels operating off the [American] coast."[14] Together, these acts provided the groundwork for America's naval war with France.

Included in the bills which were passed that summer were those authorizing the arming of merchant ships for their own defense. On June 25, 1798, Congress passed the first bill, which not only allowed private vessels to

14. Dudley W. Knox, ed., *Naval Documents Related to the Quasi-War with France* (Washington, 1935-1938), I, pp. iv, v.

sail armed but also empowered the crews of merchant ships to "oppose and defend against any search, restraint or seizure . . . by the commander or crew of any vessel under French colors" provided the owners posted bonds to insure against use of the armament against neutral shipping.[15] On July 9, Congress passed a second bill which authorized the granting of commissions to merchantmen to defend themselves against the depredations of the French. While efforts were under way to build a navy, American merchant ships were to be armed to defend themselves.[16]

By the end of May, American warships, one or two per month, began putting to sea, and what has generally been called America's Quasi-War with France began in earnest. But the frenzy of activity in Washington in 1798 must have seemed a painfully slow process for the merchant ships at sea. For the Navy, the war was only beginning, but for American merchant ships, the war was already in its second year. The operations of French privateers had already caused major disruptions of American trade. In March 1797, for instance, French privateers besieged fourteen American merchant vessels at the port of Malaga on the coast of Spain for three months. The American ships only managed to escape when they fell in with two English frigates, which escorted them out of the harbor.[17]

The dangers faced by American merchant vessels in the Mediterranean were severe, but the problems faced in the Caribbean were even greater. The Caribbean had long been a center for the operations of French privateers. In June 1797, Secretary of State Pickering reported that the "seas [of the West Indies] swarm with privateers and gun-boats, which have been called forth by the latitude allowed to their depredations."[18] From numerous islands in the West Indies, the small French privateering vessels called picaroons preyed upon American shipping. It was estimated, for instance, that in August 1798, between sixty and eighty privateers were operating from the single island of Guadeloupe.[19] The operations of these privateers posed a serious threat to American shipping.

One of the most effective ways for the Navy to provide protection for American commerce from the depredations of French privateers was to convoy shipping through their areas of operation. Although the merchants and shipowners clearly favored this tactic, the Navy made only limited use of this form of protection. Part of the reason was logistical. The resources of America's Navy were too limited to allow adequate protection for American shipping. In his address of May 16, 1797, Adams told Congress that a naval force could not be formed "as speedily and extensively as the present crisis demands."[20] In this, Adams had been prophetic. By March 1798, apart from a few revenue cutters, the United States had no warships ready for sea, and even after that date the build up of forces was gradual at best. The Navy was never able, at this point in its development, to provide adequate forces for the defense of American commerce on the high seas.[21]

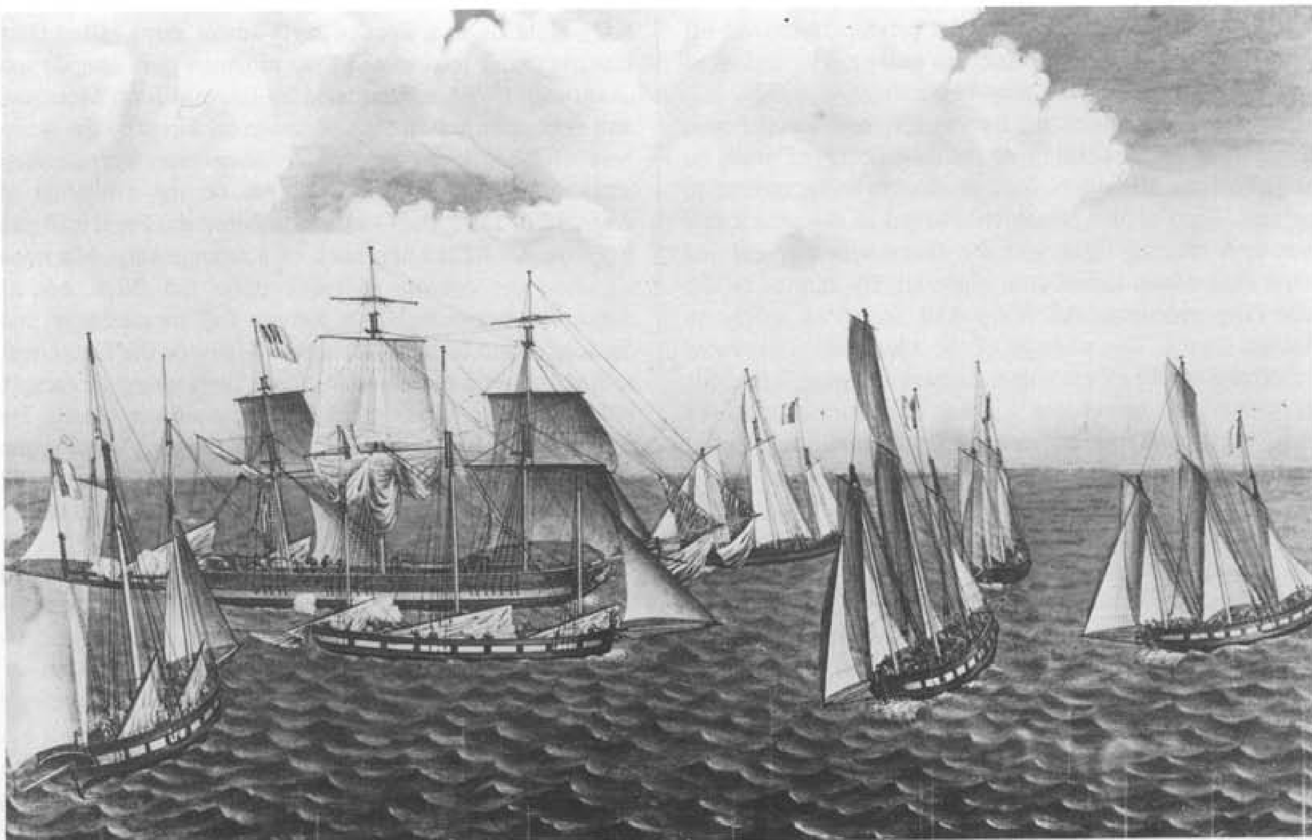
Another major reason for this hesitancy to convoy shipping was policy. Throughout America's Quasi-War with France, the consistent policy of both Adams and his Secretary of the Navy, Benjamin Stoddert, was to reserve, as much as possible, the Navy's meager resources for offensive operations against the bases of the privateers. Adams envisioned the use of American warships as "fast-sailing frigates to scour the sea" while merchant vessels were armed "to defend themselves against all unlawful aggressors, and take and burn and destroy all vessels . . . that shall attack them."[22] Stoddert also seemed to be in total agreement with this policy. In September 1798, Stoddert wrote to a Connecticut merchant:

> Our Force is yet to[o] small to admit the convoying of our Trade; and it has been thought that it would be rendered the most effective Security to it, in our power to render, to find employment for the French Cruisers, about their own islands, by attacking them there.[23]

This policy to avoid the use of warships for convoy duty was to have major consequences for American merchant ships.

The result of this aggressive policy, as strategically sound as it may have been, was effectively to force American merchant vessels to defend themselves. This was particularly true of the vessels engaged in the European and Mediterranean trade, which sailed throughout the conflict without escort from American naval vessels and were forced to defend themselves from the French

15. Claussen, *Admin. of John Adams*, IX, pp. 18-19.
16. Ibid., pp. 148-9.
17. Knox, *Naval Documents*, I, pp. 20, 27.
18. Claussen, *Admin. of John Adams*, IX, pp. 14-15.
19. Knox, *Naval Documents*, I, p. 336.
20. U.S. Presidents, *Messages of the Presidents*, p. 86.
21. John C. Miller, The Federalist Era, 1789-1801 (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 215.
22. Adams, *Works of John Adams*, IX, p. 607.
23. Knox, *Naval Documents*, I, pp. 425-6.



The *Betsey* of Philadelphia being attacked by seven French privateers. Photo courtesy of the Mariner's Museum, Newport News, Virginia.

and Spanish privateers which infested the waters around Gibraltar.

Initially, the arming of merchant vessels proved to be a relatively effective deterrent to the depredations of French privateers, which were generally ill-equipped to overcome armed resistance. "The French Privateers are but badly prepared for action," Stoddert reported to Adams in August 1798. "They are seldom well armed, and they afford no protection to their Men—they cannot meet [ships in battle] except to board vessels of equal force in guns."[24] This proved to be particularly the case in the European trade, where armed merchant vessels achieved many notable successes in the strategic Straits of Gibraltar. In October 1798, the American Ambassador to Spain reported that one privateer returned to the Spanish port of San Sebastian "in a scattered condition," with its captain, first officer, and seven of its crew killed while the American merchant vessel it attacked continued upon its voyage.[25] The policy also provided political advantages for the Adams administration: "When our merchants are armed, if they are taken, they cannot blame the government."[26] For the government, the arming of merchant vessels proved a satisfactory course of action.

The armed merchant vessels faced many dangers, as can be illustrated by the voyage of the armed merchant ship *Mary*. The *Mary* sailed from Hancock's Wharf in Boston with a cargo of sugar and fish on January 30, 1799, and passed through the Straits of Gibraltar on March 6. It did not take long for the *Mary* to encounter privateers. Just before dusk on the following day, the crew spotted an armed vessel to the landward. Nothing happened throughout the night, but by the following morning a second privateer had joined the first and together both moved to the attack. For two hours, the fight con-

24. *Ibid.*, p. 336.

25. Ibid., p. 507.

26. Adams, *Works of John Adams*, IX, pp. 607-608.

tinued until about noon, when the privateers moved off and the *Mary* was able to make its escape. The ordeal of the *Mary*, however, was only beginning.

The *Mary* continued on its voyage, and for the next twenty-four hours nothing of incident occurred until, on the following afternoon, four privateers were spotted to the east. Two of the privateers moved to the attack and kept up a running fight with the *Mary* with a round and grape shot which lasted until nightfall. By sunrise on the following morning, the *Mary* had anchored safely in Malaga Roads. The passage of the *Mary* well illustrated the effectiveness of arming merchant vessels. While the *Mary* survived her ordeal without casualties among her crew, her opponents had not been so lucky. Soon after the *Mary*'s arrival, one of the privateers with which it had been fighting entered the harbor with two of its crew dead and thirteen wounded.[27]

It was at Havana, however, on the northern coast of Cuba, where American merchant shipping faced its severest test. By the summer of 1798, the situation in the West Indies was so bad that French privateers literally held an entire fleet of American merchant ships hostage at that port. First-hand accounts of the situation vary greatly. On August 10, 1798, for instance, Secretary of the Navy Stoddert reported that sixty merchant vessels were awaiting convoy, with little chance of escaping the French cruisers. The situation then deteriorated still further. On August 18, a Salem merchant reported that some twenty to thirty French privateers were preventing one hundred merchant ships from sailing from Havana. To confuse matters still further, Stoddert submitted a second report on August 25 reporting eighty vessels with cargoes valued at two million dollars blockaded at Havana by privateers. Whatever the exact status of events in Cuba, the situation was unquestionably grave.[28]

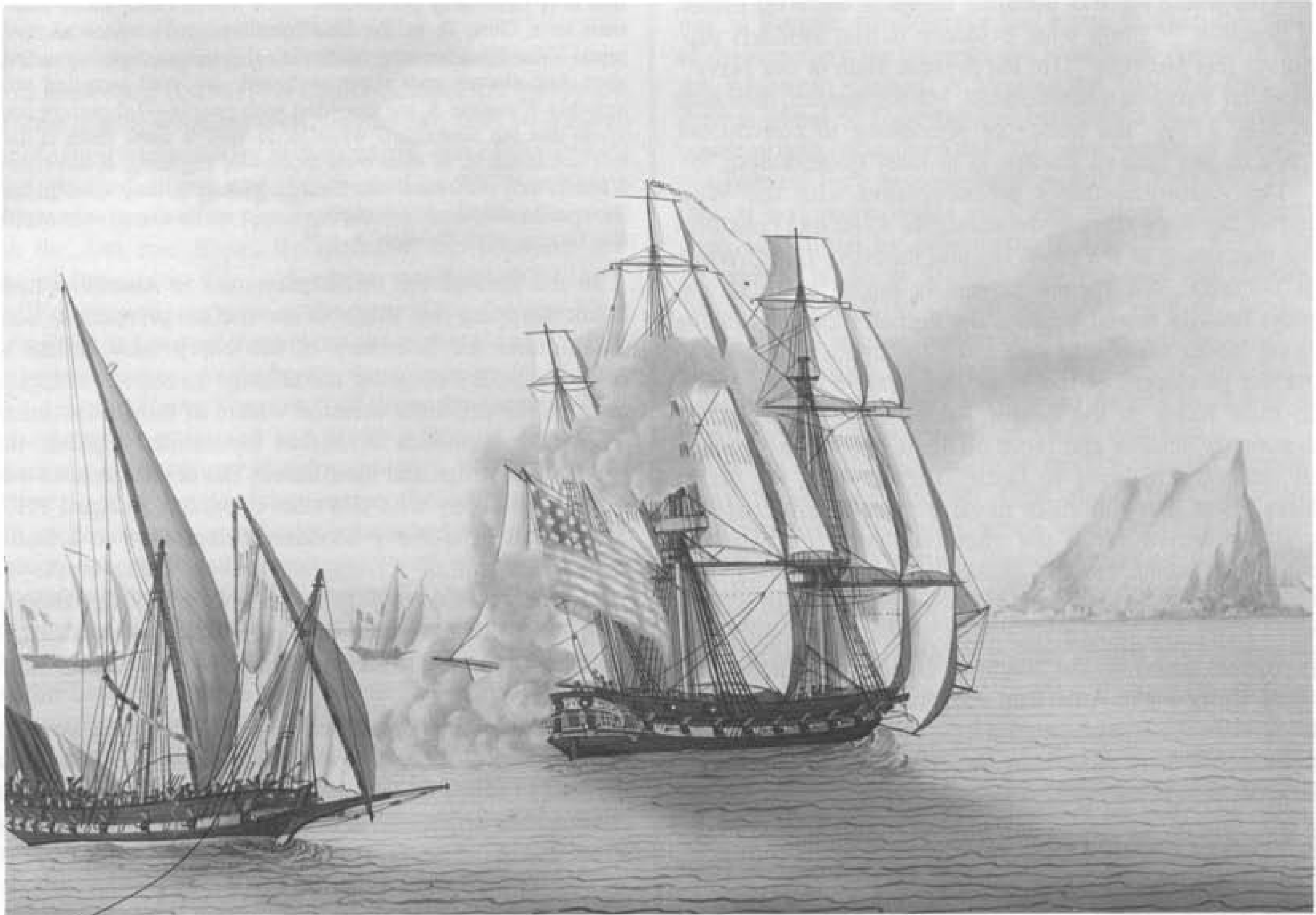
Since the government lacked the resources to break the stalemate in Cuba, the authorization to arm proved a godsend for the American merchant vessels blockaded in Havana harbor and certainly improved morale among the sailors on the American merchant vessels. On September 5, 1798, *Claypoole's Daily Advertiser* reported "a very visable [sic] alteration in their conduct" with the arrival of two armed American merchant ships.[29] Reassurance was not safety, however, as the merchant fleet would soon discover.

On Sunday, August 19, 1798, after a virtual siege of sixty-eight days, a fleet of sixty-seven ships sailed from Havana under the escort of the nineteen-gun, armed merchant ship *Eliza*, commanded by Captain John Morrison, and two other armed merchantmen all hired by the members of the convoy to provide protection. For the first week, the voyage went well, but on the afternoon of August 26, 1798, the fleet encountered the French frigate *Preyoyante*. At the approach of a strange ship, Morrison signaled the convoy to close upon the *Eliza*, but as darkness approached, the convoy fell increasingly into confusion and became scattered. Many of the faster vessels abandoned the convoy, using their speed to escape, while the *Eliza* remained to escort the slower vessels. By morning, the frigate had taken nine prizes, including the Danish ship *Bernstrosse*, a Danish schooner, and several American vessels. The majority, however, made it safely intact to an American port.[30]

Legally, the armed merchant vessels were commissioned to defend themselves from French armed ships and privateers, yet some of these vessels, motivated by resentment of French aggressions, undertook offensive operations. On August 26, 1798, the armed merchant schooner *Amphrite*, of ten guns and twenty-two men, overtook a ship and a schooner near the island of Grenada in the West Indies. The *Amphrite* had just moved into hailing distance and Captain Thomas Snell was ready to reach for his speaking trumpet when a broadside burst from the ship. The volley did no damage, however, and Snell's crew, already at quarters, immediately returned fire. It proved to be a lively fight lasting two and a half hours, but at the end, with six guns dismounted and ammunition running low, Snell was forced to withdraw the *Amphrite* from the fight. Despite the aggressive attitude of her commander (or possibly because of it), the career of the *Amphrite* was a short one. On October 7, 1798, the privateer *Fleur de la Mer* plundered the schooner and left her stranded on the Island de Aves. The adventurous career of the *Amphrite* was the exception. For the majority of armed merchant vessels, trade, not fighting, was the goal, and most found flight preferable to battle as a means of defense when the opportunity presented itself.[31]

Until the spring of 1799, armed merchant vessels were able to hold their own against the depredations of the French privateers. "The French Privateers which have infested the Streights of Gibraltor [sic] are very cautious about approaching near American vessels until it is ascertained whether or not it is well armed," the American

27. Knox, *Naval Documents*, II, pp. 296, 426, 431, 432, 435, 463.
28. *Ibid.*, pp. 288, 319, 336.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
30. *Ibid.*, I, pp. 352-3, 373; II, pp. 149, 162.
31. *Ibid.*, II, p. 150.



American ship *Mount Vernon* in Naples, built in Salem, 1798, by artist M. Corné. Photo courtesy of Peabody Museum of Salem.

Ambassador to Spain reported in March 1799.[32] If the arming of merchant vessels proved a deterrent to privateers, however, it proved to be only a temporary one, for in the same report the Ambassador to Spain also warned of larger, better-equipped privateers being fitted out there. Ominous warnings came from other sources as well. In March, Spanish vessels, sailing with French letters of marque, were reported to have taken six prizes in eleven days at Gibraltar. "[S]carcely an unarmed vessel comes into the streights that is not taken," reported an American visitor there.[33] Similar reports of increased privateer activities came from North Africa as well. "[T]he French Privateers stationed hereabouts have of late increased not only in number," reported James Simpson, the American Consul at Tangier, "but several of them have had heavier Guns and more men put on board."[34] Clearly, by the spring and summer of 1799, French privateers around Gibraltar were better equipped, and privateering activities were more extensive.

Although the increased activities of the privateers in the Mediterranean presented an ever-increasing threat for American commerce, neither Adams nor Stoddert was willing to divert American naval forces from the West Indies to Gibraltar to convoy American merchant shipping there. "Although I am very solicitous to strike strokes in Europe," Adams wrote to Stoddert in August 1799, "I

32. *Ibid.*, p. 436.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 501-2.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 501-2.

feel the whole force of deciding things in the West Indies, if possible."[35] From what evidence exists, Stoddert supported this position. "[I]n the present State of our Navy," Stoddert wrote to a Marblehead, Massachusetts, merchant in May 1799, "the policy of attempting to convoy our trade to any part of Europe is at least questionable."[36]

The Administration's preoccupation with the West Indies becomes more understandable when one considers the magnitude of the problems that the Navy faced. While at Gibraltar, the French privateers began using larger, more heavily armed vessels, the French picaroons of the West Indies seemed to take quite the opposite approach. As the privateers of the West Indies were driven closer to their bases in the Lesser Antilles, they became increasingly smaller and more difficult for the larger ships of the Navy to bring to battle. These "small fry privateers,"[37] as one American naval officer called them, literally swarmed out of the traditional privateer bases on the West Indian Islands of Martinique, Dominica, and Guadeloupe. The privateering operations on these islands were extensive indeed. Between March and June 1800, privateers based on the island of Guadeloupe alone captured thirty-eight American merchant vessels. In addition, when the British captured the island of St. Domingo and opened it to American trade, privateers established new bases to harass American shipping at St. John, Puerto Rico, where, as one contemporary noted, privateers "swarm around the harbor."[38]

The problems of the American Navy in attempting to control such operations were tremendous, for the privateers posed the type of threat that a formal navy had difficulty controlling. As one American naval officer reported:

[T]heir art & ingenuity puzzles the imagination, for one would suppose the vast number of our Cruisers, as well as those of the British would discourage them, but the fact is not so, they bid us defiance & feed themselves very handsomely at our expence [sic] for they are like Hydra's heads and multiply daily.[39]

Part of this "art & ingenuity" consisted of the tactics the privateers used in taking their prizes, which the armed merchant vessels were ill-equipped to combat. In July 1799, the American Consul at Curacao reported:

Permit me to intrude one observation, on the present mode of arming as practiced by the American Merchantmen & to say, that it is extremely erroneous, . . . I seldom find more than 2 men to a Gun, & in the late instances there were no small arms—The Privateers by no means depend on fighting at long shot, but always endeavour to board, are well supplied with suitable Weapons & are crowded with people—I therefore conclude that the Americans w[oul]d do well to meet them, if they can'not avoid it, in their own mode—of Fighting, & have their Vessels well protected with Boarding Netting, they wou[l]d then have some chance & w[oul]d not as in many cases, only supply the Enemy with Cannon & c.[40]

In the face of the threat presented to American merchant shipping by these West Indian privateers, both Adams and his Secretary of the Navy were forced to follow a policy of using naval ships to convoy shipping through the privateer-infested waters of the Caribbean as well as to conduct offensive operations against the privateering ships and their bases. The administration was not always happy with this state of affairs. In April 1799, Secretary of the Navy Stoddert complained to a Baltimore merchant of all his fast vessels being employed "too much in Convoying instead of being kept intirely [sic] for Cruising which arose from the great desire of Commanders to give all possible satisfaction to the merchants."[41]

Even with these measures, however, the Navy was unable to control the activities of the French privateers in the West Indies. In fact, the Navy was not even able to confine their operations to that area. In July 1800, Stoddert wrote to one of his captains:

Considerable depredations have been lately made on our Commerce, between the WI Islands & our own Coasts—The Guadaloupe Privateers . . . not only capture the American vessels in the WI trade, but make great havoc among those of more value, employed in the European & East India Trade.[42]

Even Stoddert admitted the Navy's inability to provide protection for American commerce. As he complained to a Philadelphia merchant in July 1800:

I cannot accomplish with less than Forty vessels, twenty times as much as the British Nation can do with twenty times as many—They cannot with all their force give complete protection in their own channel to their merchant vessels, nor should it be expected that there would not be captures of American Vessels in the West Indies, and between the Islands and our own coast—[43]

With the inability of the Navy to provide protection, it fell again upon American merchant ships to defend them-

35. *Ibid.*, IV, p. 29.
36. *Ibid.*, III, p. 162.
37. *Ibid.*, V, p. 177.
38. *Ibid.*, IV, p. 505.
39. *Ibid.*, V, p. 177.
40. *Ibid.*, III, p. 523.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 523.
42. *Ibid.*, VI, p. 149.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

selves even on their own coasts. The experience of the ship *Ann and Hope* was typical.

On the morning of July 30, 1800, the ship *Ann and Hope* was homeward bound from Canton, China, to Providence, Rhode Island, when her crew sighted two sails well astern of the merchantman. By mid-morning, one of the vessels had changed course and disappeared to the West, but a schooner remained in apparent pursuit and closed rapidly on the *Ann and Hope*. By nightfall, the schooner followed literally in the wake of the merchant ship.

The situation was tense as the crew of the *Ann and Hope* remained at quarters throughout the night, closely watching the schooner. At daybreak, the schooner closed upon the *Ann and Hope*. Three or four times the captain of the merchantman attempted to hail the schooner, seeking to discover its intention. Finally, the crew of the *Ann and Hope* fired a warning shot across the schooner's bow. The schooner responded with a broadside. The sea battle which ensued lasted three-quarters of an hour, during which time the *Ann and Hope* expended ninety-four rounds of ammunition. In the end, the *Ann and Hope* was lucky, however, and was able to drive off the attack with only minor damage. Others were not so lucky, and after two years of undeclared war, the toll continued to mount.[44]

By the fall of 1799, Adams was ready to attempt diplomacy, in addition to gunpowder, in an effort to settle America's differences with France, and in September, against the advice of his Cabinet, he asked Congress to appoint envoys to go to Paris to undertake negotiations. Many hoped that the opening of negotiations would decrease the intensity of the naval conflict, and to a limited extent they did. In February 1800, a merchant house in Lisbon reported a change in French attitudes towards American merchant vessels, and at Malaga, in one post, instructions from Paris overturned the condemnation of fourteen neutral vessels, with heavy penalties against the owners of the privateers which detained them. If these incidents raised hopes for an end of the depredations, however, they soon passed. By May, the American minister to Spain reported that the French and Spanish privateers had resumed their operations, while from the West Indies came no reports of a remission of privateer activity at all.[45]

In fairness to the French, however, one has to question the degree of control which the French government held over the activities of their privateers, especially those

44. *Ibid.*, pp. 206, 214.
45. *Ibid.*, V, pp. 234-5, 494.

operating in the West Indies. During the long years of war in Europe, privateering had come to form the basis of the economy for many of the islands. In August 1799, the American Consul at Paramaribo reported that the French island of Cayenne had become "a little Algiers," where privateering provided "the very harvest of Plunder . . . [where] they have no other means of Supplies."[46] In fact, it was increasingly clear that not all depredations were committed by privateers. In December 1799, the American Consul at St. Domingo reported that pirates, "availing themselves of the unsettled state of things," established a base at Gonaives, an island off the coast of Haiti, from which they preyed upon unarmed shipping.[47] Where privateering had become so deeply ingrained in everyday life, it would not be easily removed.

For six months the American envoys pursued negotiations and on September 30, 1800, signed the Convention of Amity and Commerce, which would not only end the fighting, but also restore Franco-American commercial relations. Americans were cautious and hesitant in their acceptance of French intentions to honor the agreement. On December 30, 1800, Stoddert issued instructions to his Captains:

> It will be proper that you treat the armed vessels of France (Public and Private) exactly as you find they treat our Trading vessels—if they continue their depredations, you will continue to capture them—if they cease to molest our trade, you will so conduct yourself, as to convince them that we can return to a State of amity with the French Nation, not only without reluctance—but with pleasure.[48]

By January 1801, word of the treaty began reaching the Caribbean islands, and despite the widespread apprehension of many, the prospects for peace appeared good. On February 6, word reached St. Barts that the equipage of privateers at Guadeloupe had been suspended and that two American merchant ships had been released. Three days later, a second report announced the release of several additional merchant vessels at the same port. American warships on patrol in the Caribbean confirmed the reports as well. "[Y]ou may now assure the Merchants of the United States that their trade will no longer be molested by French Cruisers," Alexander Murray, Captain of the U.S.S. *Constellation*, reported to the Capitol on February 3, 1801. The war which had never really begun was now over.[49]

46. *Ibid.*, IV, p. 53.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 505.
48. *Ibid.*, VII, pp. 55-6.
49. *Ibid.*, VIII, pp. 113, 117, 119.

Traditionally, historians have viewed the Quasi-War with France as a series of individual naval actions which served, in their turn, to provide the impetus behind the permanent foundation of the Navy and to train American naval officers for their more famous role in later conflicts. While this contention is valid, it nonetheless gives a misleading view of the nature of America's undeclared naval war with France. For American merchant seamen, the war was not a few isolated battles, but a constant, often deadly, struggle for survival. While the battles of America's new warships served to help vindicate American honor both abroad and at home, the essence of the war was not the battle between navies, but rather the battle between privateers and merchant vessels as they went about their daily routine. For them and for their war, there was no glory. For them there was only trade. This is, indeed, an important, if overlooked, aspect of America's Quasi-War with France.

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