



# **Napoleon's Troublesome Americans: Franco-American Relations, 1804-1815**

*Peter P. Hill*

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Shortly before the United States declared war on Great Britain in June 1812, Congress came within two votes of declaring war on Napoleon Bonaparte's French empire. For six years, France and Britain had both seized American shipping. While common wisdom says that America was virtually an innocent in this matter, caught in the middle of the epic wars between France and Britain, Peter Hill has uncovered a far more complex and interesting history. French privateers and Napoleon's navy were seizing American merchant ships in a concerted attempt to disrupt Britain's commerce. American ships were the principal carriers of British goods to the continent, and Napoleon believed his best, and perhaps only, hope to defeat Britain was to cut off that market. While the French emperor sought an accommodation with America, the administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison continually frustrated him. American diplomatic fumbling sent mixed messages, and American neutrality policies, Hill finds, were more punishing to France than to Britain. Always interested in lucrative ventures, American merchant ships also became the main suppliers of food to British forces fighting Napoleon in Spain and Portugal. By 1812, the United States was on a collision course with both Britain and France over clashes on the high seas, and war with two major powers at once might have proven disastrous for the young United States. Hill's engaging narrative details the fascinating history of America's troubled relationship with Napoleon and how this crisis with France was finally averted.

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