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978-1-107-02508-0 - Free Trade and Sailors' Rights in the War of 1812

Paul A. Gilje

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## Free Trade and Sailors' Rights in the War of 1812

On July 2, 1812, Captain David Porter raised a banner on the USS *Essex* proclaiming “A free trade and sailors’ rights,” thus creating a political slogan that explained the War of 1812. Free trade demanded the protection of American commerce, while sailors’ rights insisted that the British end the impressment of seamen from American ships. Repeated for decades in Congress and in taverns, the slogan reminds us today that our second war with Great Britain was not a mistake. It was a contest for the ideals of the American Revolution, bringing together the high culture of the Enlightenment to establish a new political economy and the low culture of the common folk to assert the equality of humankind. Understanding the War of 1812 and the motto that came to explain it – free trade and sailors’ rights – allows us to better comprehend the origins of the American nation.

Paul A. Gilje is a George Lynn Cross Research Professor in the Department of History at the University of Oklahoma. He holds an M.A. and Ph.D. from Brown University and has held fellowships at Johns Hopkins University and Washington University in Saint Louis. Gilje is the author of *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763–1834*; *Riots in America*; *Liberty on the Waterfront: Society and Culture of the American Maritime World in the Age of Revolution, 1750–1850*; and *The Making of the American Republic, 1763–1815*. *Liberty on the Waterfront* received the 2004 Society for Historians of the Early American Republic Best Book Prize and the 2004 North American Society for Oceanic History John Lyman Book Award in the category of United States Maritime History. Professor Gilje has organized an adult civics program in the state of Oklahoma, consulted for museums, edited several books, and lectured widely in Europe and America. Throughout his career he has sustained an interest in how common people have been affected by the larger events of history.

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*University of Oklahoma*



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*To Gordon S. Wood*

*Friend and Mentor*

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## Acknowledgments

As I have indicated in the Introduction, this book emerged while I was working on another book at the C. V. Starr Center for the Study of the American Experience, Chestertown, Maryland, in November 2008. For this opportunity to spend a month on the Maryland eastern shore I thank Adam Goodheart; Hodson Trust-Griswold, director of the center; Jill Oglie Titus, associate director; Michael Buckley, program director; and Jenifer Emiley, center coordinator. I owe also a special thanks to President Baird Tipton of Washington College and the crew of the *Sultana*, a re-created schooner from the eighteenth century, for a daylong cruise aboard the *Sultana* on the Chester River. I thank, too, Adam and Jill and the crew of the *Pride of Baltimore II* for a second sail on the Chester River on a tall ship built on the model of a War of 1812 privateer.

The long essay I wrote that November became the basis of my presidential address for the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic, which, thanks to Illinois State Historian Thomas F. Schwartz and SHEAR Conference coordinator Craig Friend, I delivered from the podium in the Old State House in Springfield, Illinois, on July 19, 2009. The thrill of speaking from the same platform used by Abraham Lincoln for his house-divided speech was matched by the enthusiastic response of my many friends and supporters within SHEAR. If I had any doubts about my decision to write this book, they quickly evaporated amid the encouragement I received that evening and the subsequent chants of “Free Trade and Sailors’ Rights” at the banquet later that night. Indeed, that rowdy response, and the many notes I have received since with the phrase or versions of the phrase as a tag line, has further convinced me that there was something peculiarly catchy in Porter’s motto that helps to explain its popularity during the War of 1812 and in the decades that followed.

The fall of 2010 brought me under the shadow of Adam Smith with a semester of teaching at the University of Glasgow. I thank Simon Newman for

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organizing this visit to Scotland and helping me arrange a series of lectures in the United Kingdom and France where I could share my ideas on the War of 1812. That fall I presented papers at the American Studies Seminar at the University of Glasgow (hosted by Marina Moscowitz); the Early American History Seminar at the University of Edinburgh (hosted by Frank Cogliano); the Rothermere American Institute, Oxford University (hosted by Peter Tuck); the Centre d'Etudes Nord-Américaines, L'école des Hautes Etude en Sciences Sociales, University of Paris (hosted by Pierre Gervais); and the Institut Charles-V, Paris Université Diderot-Paris (hosted by Allan Potofsky). I also delivered the Carolyn Robbins Lecture in Eighteenth-Century History at the Institute for the Study of America, University of London (hosted by Iwan Morgan). In each instance I was graciously received and enjoyed the challenge of questions from non-American audiences. More recently I presented some of my ideas on free trade and the origins of the War of 1812 on the American side of the Atlantic at the Boston Area Seminar on Early American History at the Massachusetts Historical Society, where my commentator was Drew McCoy and where I was hosted by Conrad Wright and Alan Rogers.

I owe a great professional debt to the many historians who have written on the early republic before me. The more I learned about the complexities of early American diplomacy, the more dependent on the work of others I became. My notes only begin to account for that debt. My editor at Cambridge, Lewis Bateman, has been especially supportive. When I first discussed this book with him and suggested that I would like to put off another book project until I had completed this work, without batting an eye he said that Cambridge would publish this book as well as the book I had signed on to write. Of course, the final manuscript still had to go through the normal peer review process, and I therefore thank the two anonymous readers who supported its publication. Also of assistance in preparing this book for publication at Cambridge University Press were Anne Lovering Rounds and Shaun T. Vigil. I thank, too, the copy editor of the book, Russell Hahn, for his keen eye and able pencil in correcting my prose.

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The dedication of this book is to Gordon S. Wood, my mentor from graduate school. Gordon did not read a word of the book before it was published, and I am not sure whether he would approve of everything I write, yet his influence is on every page. Although part of that influence is reflected in the interpretation presented here, it is mostly reflected in my effort to think boldly and across great sweeps of time. Whether I have succeeded in this I will allow the reader to judge. Regardless of that success, I offer the dedication as testimony to my great respect for Gordon and the model of scholarship he has established.

This book represents an important bridge between teaching and research. In 2002 I began to teach in a master's program in international affairs offered by the University of Oklahoma on military bases overseas. This has been a wonderful experience, providing multiple trips to Europe and introducing me to many exceptional individuals in the American armed forces. I want to thank these students not only for serving their country, but also for responding so positively to the course I was offering. They nurtured in me an interest in the origins of American foreign policy that I took to the classroom in Norman, where, encouraged by my undergraduate students in Oklahoma, I probed more and more deeply into the subject until I felt compelled to write this book. I also want to thank the Glaswegian students who enrolled in my class on the early republic in Scotland. Taken together, these graduate and undergraduate students, now numbering in the hundreds, have contributed significantly to what I have written.

It has been my great fortune to work in the History Department at the University of Oklahoma for more than thirty years. The university is blessed with a great administration, including President David Boren, Provost Nancy Mergler, and Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences Paul Bell, who expect their faculty to be good teachers while also supporting innovative research. Within the History Department, Rob Griswold has not only been a superb chair, but has also been my good friend with whom I have shared so much in the years since we both arrived on campus in 1980. Several colleagues have heard me rant and rave over this project in the last few years, but I would especially like to single out Cathy Kelly, Josh Piker, and Fay Yarbrough, who have probably heard more about free trade and sailors' rights than they had ever expected. I have also been lucky enough to have had several able graduate assistants who have aided me in my research. These include Robert Barnett, Patrick Bottiger, Dan Flaherty, and Billy Smith. Robyn McMillin, who completed her dissertation under my direction a few years ago, has aided me in a number of ways. I will also mention three university colleagues, none of whom studies anything remotely close to history, who have heard me talk of this project on our noontime runs. Thanks, then, to Fred Carr of the School of Meteorology and David Sabatini and Randy Kolar, both of the School of Civil Engineering and Environmental Science, for being such good friends for so many miles.

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The center of my life remains my family. As I get older, I think of how important my brother and sister, Stephen Gilje and Kathleen Gilje, are in my life even though they live far away. Words cannot express how excited I am about what wonderful adults my children, Erik and Karin, have become. I owe my greatest debt, always, to my wife and life partner, Ann. Thank you, Ann, for being there.