As long as foreign ships crowded the harbor, the Portuguese Crown had limited means to crack down on smuggling. The harbor was extensive both in a geographic and in a specialized sense and had to accommodate very different types of cargoes. Some were distinguished by a very high ratio of value to bulk, such as gold, spices and luxury fabrics. But others were typically bulky and of comparatively low value, such as salt, grain and timber. When the Crown declared a tighter regimen of customs control to prevent gold from slipping through its hands, it provoked a frenzy of protest from all of Lisbon’s foreign factories, who envisioned the transaction costs of all of their trades in the harbor reaching unacceptably high levels. The profits coming from sugar, gold and luxury fabrics could justify the extra expenses—always paid for merchants themselves—in a tightened regime of control. But shippers in the bulk carrying trades could not pay for the extra guards and inspections that were called for in order to prevent gold smuggling. The Portuguese Crown was forced to back down, lest it hinder all shipping in Lisbon harbor.

However, there were other methods available to discourage the export of untaxed gold, including exemplary punishment or harassment. On several occasions Portuguese officials seized and imprisoned British merchants for suspected gold smuggling, but this led to excessive headaches for both sides. They could, however, exploit the latent xenophobia of dock workers and local populations. Tyrawley testified about frequent acts of mob violence visited upon British ships and their crews, which included having ships at anchor pelted with rocks from the shore. This was a situation where the Crown could claim that it was not complicit, but Tyrawley admitted that official tolerance for mob actions was almost certainly linked with British gold smuggling. Again, though only a qualitative description of the smuggling may be proffered from the sources, contemporaries, even those with reason to deny it, believed it was going on.

Why was the Portuguese Crown so limited in its repertoire of responses to gold smuggling from Lisbon, whether real or perceived? The British Crown had taken on some of the cost of protection of Portuguese shipping to Brazil, and the Portuguese Crown could not afford to lose this benefit. Sending gold to London was part of the price of this protection. This is a notion long acknowledged by historians, but Britain’s role in guaranteeing Portugal’s exclusive rights to intercourse with Brazil is generally not credited. In times of war, the guarantee was explicit. British troops fought Spanish ones on Portuguese soil during the War of the Spanish Succession, and the British navy made an effort to protect Rio de Janeiro from French attack in 1711, even though its ships were too late to prevent it. At times British men-of-war directly protected the Brazil Fleets, as they did in 1735 when Admiral John Norris was dispatched to Lisbon to escort them into Lisbon harbor, then under threat of Spanish attack.

But even in times of peace, the British navy played a role. This was seen particularly in its intermittent efforts against Barbary pirates. From the inception of Brazilian traffic, ships and cargoes had fallen prey to pirates from Salé (Sallee) and other north-African pirate states. These predators typically infested Portuguese waters beyond the mouth of the Tagus, near Cabo da Roca or Peniche, where they would pick off