



## HISTORY STORIES



*VCG Wilson/Corbis/Getty Images*

One of the world's most instantly recognizable cultural icons, [Napoleon](#) Bonaparte is usually depicted with one hand in his waistcoat—and short and aggressive. His supposedly small stature and fiery temper has inspired the term the Napoleon Complex, a popular belief that short men tend to compensate for their lack of height through domineering behavior and aggression.

But was Napoleon really short?

In fact, he was probably of average height. According to pre-metric system French measures, he was a diminutive 5'2." But the French inch (*pouce*) of the time was 2.7 cm, while the Imperial inch was shorter, at 2.54 cm. Three French sources—his valet

Constant, General Gourgaud, and his personal physician Francesco Antommarchi—said that Napoleon's height was just over *'5 pieds 2 pouces'* (5'2"). Applying the French measurements of the time, that equals around 1.69 meters, or just over 5'5". So at 5'5" he was just an inch or so below the period's average adult male height.

## British Cartoonist James Gillray's Famous Depictions

So if Napoleon was of average height, where does the legend of his small stature come from? It was, in fact, largely the work of one man: the British cartoonist [James Gillray](#) (1756-1815). Gillray's caricatural depictions of the French general were so popular and influential that at the end of his life Napoleon said that Gillray "did more than all the armies of Europe to bring me down."

From the start, Gillray satirized Napoleon as a thundering, boastful character, if not necessarily short. In 1798, the English Admiral Horatio Nelson destroyed the French Fleet at the Battle of the Nile. In Gillray's cartoon, "Buonaparte hearing of Nelson's Victory swears by his Sword to Extirpate the English from off the Earth," Napoleon brandishes a bloody sword and boasts of the many military victories he has already carried off—so many that the speech bubble threatens to overwhelm the image. But in this image he is more muscular than small. It was a later cartoon that ushered in the diminutive image we are so familiar with today.

Gillray's cartoon "Maniac-raving's-or-Little Boney in a strong fit" (1803) was a satire of a genuine diplomatic incident which had occurred on March 14, 1803 at the Tuileries palace in Paris. In front of hundreds of European dignitaries, Napoleon vented his rage at Lord Whitworth, the British ambassador:

"On the appearance of Lord Whitworth in the circle, he approached him with equal agitation and ferocity, proceeded to descant, in the bitterest terms, on the conduct of the English Government—summoned the Ministers of some of the Foreign Courts to be witnesses to this vituperative harangue—and concluded by expressions of the most angry and menacing hostility....this brutal and ungentlemanly attack... terminated by the First Consul [Napoleon] retiring to his apartments, repeating his last phrases, till he had shut himself in; leaving nearly two hundred spectators of this wanton display of arrogant impropriety, in amazement and consternation."

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Gillray's cartoon depicts a tiny Napoleon wearing boots that dwarf him, tearing his hair out in rage. He is surrounded by overturned furniture that is as big as he is, with speech bubbles swirling around him filled with manic raging thoughts about Britain. The name "Little Boney" would stick, and Gillray from that point on continually depicted the French Emperor as diminutive, raging and boastful—like a child throwing a temper tantrum.

Described as "probably the most famous political cartoon of all time," Gillray's 1805 cartoon, "The Plumb-pudding in danger, or, State epicures taking un petit souper," shows the British Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger and Napoleon carving up the world into spheres of influence. Napoleon is drawn as half the size of his British counterpart, having to stand up to be able to use his carving knife, which is actually a sword. While Pitt's share of the globe is much bigger than Napoleon's, it is telling that Napoleon easily takes all of Europe (except Britain and Ireland).

## Fear of French Conquest

British anxieties over Napoleon's breakneck conquest of continental Europe and his evident intent to install relatives and favorites in positions of power were manifest in Gillray's 1806 cartoon, "Tiddy-Doll, the Great French-Gingerbread-Baker; Drawing Out a New Batch of Kings." It portrays Napoleon as a baker, whipping up gingerbread monarchs while his assistant, French Foreign Minister Talleyrand kneads up Poland, Hungary and Turkey.

While the name "Tiddy-Doll" referred to Tiddy-Dol Ford, a famous London gingerbread street hawker, the depiction of Napoleon a small, doll-like figure could only heap ridicule on him, despite the fears of his seemingly unstoppable power that the cartoon clearly responds to.

And it worked. Shortly after these cartoons appeared, Napoleon sent a flurry of diplomatic notes across the English Channel demanding that the British government censor its press. Needless to say, British ministers ignored him.

Gillray's image of Napoleon as a small man was so popular that other cartoonists took it up. An anonymous 1811 cartoon, "Bony's visions or a great little man's night comforts," shows Napoleon having night terrors as the cracks in his empire had begun to show. Among the many fearful figures swirling around him, a demon holds up a placard inscribed with the horrors of political satire, among which "Gilray's Caricatures" is listed.

The enduring influence of Gillray's satire that reduced the once-inexorable and mighty general Napoleon Buonaparte to a tiny, raving figure shows how mockery can be a powerful weapon against the powerful.

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