



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on May 27, 2011

Bane of the Barbary Pirates

When Thomas Jefferson became the third President of the United States on March 4, 1801, there was but a fleeting hint of warning in his Inaugural Address about dangers to the young Republic from distant forces abroad. America would pursue “peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none,” he proclaimed. But he also asked for “that guidance and support which may enable us to steer with safety the vessel in which we are all embarked amidst the conflicting elements of a troubled world.”



The “vessel” metaphor was aptly chosen. For Jefferson, as Minister of France and Secretary of State, had been engaged in seeking alliances and other diplomatic maneuvers for the better of two decades to ensure the safety of U.S. vessels from the predations of Barbary Coast tyrants employing piracy on the high seas to extort ransom and tribute from nations pursuing commerce abroad. The pirates had long been successful in convincing the maritime powers of Europe that ransom and tribute were cheaper than war and were the price of doing business in the Mediterranean region. The United States was paying as well, but the question of whether the United States should continue to pay for “peace” on such terms or bear the costs and burdens of war was one of the early disputes between Jefferson and John Adams. And it was during Jefferson’s first year in office, following his victory over arch-rival Adams, that the United States began what has been called our first “war on terror” and carried it, in words memorialized in the Marine Corps hymn, “to the shores of Tripoli.”

Prior to their War for Independence, the American colonies depended on the British Royal Navy for protection on the high seas. During that war the colonists’ limited naval resources were engaged in fighting the British to the virtual exclusion of other adventures. U.S. shipping enjoyed some protection from France under the Treaty of Alliance signed between the two countries in 1778. But when the independent United States signed the Treaty of London in 1794, allowing peaceful trade between the United States and England, revolutionary France, then at war with Great Britain, was incensed at America’s abandonment of its previous position of neutrality. The French were further angered by the United States’ refusal to pay its debt to France, incurred during the War for Independence. The U.S. government claimed that this debt was owed to the now-deposed French monarchy and not the new revolutionary regime.

France began attacking and capturing so many American vessels that in June of 1797 Secretary of State Timothy Pickering informed Congress that the French had seized 316 merchant ships in the previous 11 months. That led to the rebuilding of the U.S. Navy that had been all but dismantled at the end of the war with Britain. On July 7, 1798, Congress rescinded previous treaties with France and authorized the President to purchase, arm, and man not more than 12 vessels with up to 22 guns each. Two days later Congress authorized attacks on French warships. The “Quasi War” with France was a series of naval engagements lasting until September of 1800 when France, weary of sea battles with both the United



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States and the British Royal Navy, agreed in the Treaty of Mortefontaine to an end to the hostilities and a peaceful commerce with the United States.

That still left the United States, now without the protection of any European power, with the vexing problem of Barbary pirates, one that had troubled Jefferson since long before he arrived at the White House in 1801.

Barbary Pirates

The attacks — from Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis, loosely governed regencies of the Ottoman empire, and the nation of Morocco — got the attention of the former British colonies on the North American continent beginning in 1784, when the *USS Betsey* was captured by Moroccan pirates while sailing from Cadiz, Spain, for Philadelphia with her hold full of salt. The Spanish government negotiated the return of the captured ship and crew and advised the United States to offer tribute to the Barbary States to prevent further attacks. Less than a year after the seizure of the *Betsey*, Algerian pirates operating in the Atlantic captured the U.S. merchant ships *Dauphin* and *Maria*, taking prisoner 21 crewmen and passengers. Jefferson, then the Minister to France, sent envoys to both Morocco and Algeria to negotiate treaties and to gain the return of the captives. An agreement was reached with Morocco in 1786, whereby the Moroccans agreed to end their piracy against American shipping and return American captives on any ship docked in a Moroccan port.

Algiers proved far less receptive to diplomatic entreaties. The crews of *Maria* and *Dauphin* remained in captivity for more than a decade. In 1795, the United States paid more than \$1 million for the release of 115 sailors and the same amount, demanded by the Barbary States, as tribute to prevent further attacks. In the meantime, accounts of the captivity endured by the kidnapped Americans aroused sentiment in the United States for action to put an end to the raids. Captives were pressed into hard labor under harsh conditions and were exposed to vermin and disease. “Our sufferings are beyond our expressing or your conception,” Richard O’Brien, captain of the *Dauphin*, had written to Congress from his captivity in Algeria.

In 1785, Jefferson and John Adams, then the Minister to England, met with Tripoli’s envoy to London to discuss “the ground of the pretensions” of the Barbary States to “make war upon nations who had done them no injury.” As Jefferson reported in a letter to John Jay, Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Ambassador Sidi Haji Abdrahaman informed them:

It was written in their Koran, that all nations which had not acknowledged the Prophet were sinners, whom it was their right and duty to make war on them wherever they could be found, and to make slaves of all they could take as Prisoners, and that every Musselman [Muslim] who should be slain in battle was sure to go to Paradise.

As Joseph Wheelan noted in *Jefferson’s War: America’s First War on Terror 1801-1805*, the Ambassador’s remarks were based on the rules of engagement described in the 47th Surah (or chapter) of the Koran:

Whenever you encounter the ones who disbelieve, seize them by their necks until once you have subdued them, then tie them up as prisoners, either in order to release them later on, or also to ask for ransom, until war lays down her burdens.

Paying Tributes

After hearing the terms of “peace” offered by the Ambassador, Wheelan wrote, “Jefferson gloomily



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estimated the United States would have to pay more than \$1.3 million to ransom the captives, which meant going to Amsterdam, hat in hand to request a loan from the Dutch bankers, who usually were willing to extend credit to America.” But there was no clear consensus among American officials for any alternative. Jefferson argued that paying tribute would, in addition to bleeding the country financially, encourage more attacks. He also believed his country’s honor was at stake. “The motives pleading for war rather than tribute are numerous and honorable, those opposing them mean and shortsighted,” he wrote his friend and fellow Virginian James Monroe in 1785.

Adams agreed in the long run, but believed circumstances at the time required a continuation of payments until the United States could rebuild the Navy. Going to war, he advised, would produce a military triumph at the cost of financial disaster. And paying tribute, however distasteful, was better than giving up trade in the Mediterranean.

“If We take a Vessell of theirs,” Adams argued in a letter to Jefferson, “We get nothing but a bad Vessell fit only to burn, a few Guns and a few Barbarians whom We may hang or enslave if We will, and the Unfeeling Tyrants whose Subjects they are will think no more of it, than if we had killed so many Caterpillars upon an Apple tree. When they take a Vessell of ours, they not only get a rich Prize, but they enslave the Men and if there is among them a Man of any Rank or Note they demand most exorbitant ransoms for them.” Congress, he said, “will never, or at least not for years, take any such resolution, and in the meantime our trade and honor suffers beyond calculation.”

“We ought not to fight them at all unless we determine to fight them forever,” Adams said. “This thought, I fear, is too rugged for our people to bear.” In fact, Wheelan wrote, “Jefferson and Adams were arguing a moot point; America’s federal government under the Articles of Confederation had no money under the weak articles of Confederation either for war or tribute. Consequently, there was just no Mediterranean trade.”

Following the ratification of the new Constitution in 1789, the conditions improved, however, both in terms of revenue and trade. To preserve the latter, the United States resumed the payment of tribute to the Barbary nations, in armaments as well as dollars. By 1800, the year of Jefferson’s election, payments in ransom and tribute to the pirate states amounted to 20 percent of the government’s annual revenues.

War With Pirates

Immediately prior to Jefferson’s inauguration, Congress passed legislation to provide for six frigates to be “officered as the President of the United States may direct.” Should war be declared on the United States by the Barbary powers, the act instructed the President to “protect our commerce & chastise their insolence,” with said chastisement to include “sinking, burning or destroying their ships & Vessels wherever you shall find them.” The timing was fortuitous, for the ink was hardly dry on the legislation before Yusuf Karamanli, the Pasha (or Bashaw) of Tripoli, demanded \$225,000 from the new administration. When Jefferson refused, the Pasha declared war on the United States, employing the customary Barbary manner of cutting down the flagstaff in front of the U.S. embassy.

Jefferson sent a squadron of frigates to the Mediterranean, but characteristically put a narrow construction on the constitutional power of the commander in chief to take military action in the absence of a formal declaration of war. “Jefferson consistently deferred to Congress in his dealings with the Barbary pirates,” historian Thomas Woods has written. As a result, the mission was strictly defensive. When a Tripolitan cruiser attacked one of the U.S. ships, the Americans subdued the



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attackers, captured the ship, and then, following instructions, released it.

As was often the case, Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton disagreed on the scope of executive power, the latter arguing that since Tripoli had declared war on the United States, no formal declaration by Congress was required. Congress later passed a statute that, while not called a “declaration of war,” authorized the President to seize all Tripolitan vessels and goods thereon “and also to cause to be done all such other acts of precaution or hostility as the state of war will justify.”

Jefferson increased the U.S. naval presence in the region throughout 1802. Among the ships sent to the Mediterranean under the command of Commander Edward Preble were the *USS Argus*, *Chesapeake*, *Constellation*, *Constitution*, *Enterprise*, and *Philadelphia*. The ships and crews established a blockade on Barbary ports and carried out raids on enemy fleets. The conflict reached a critical point in 1803, however, when Tripoli’s fleet captured the *Philadelphia* as it ran aground while on patrol of the Tripoli harbor. Captain William Bainbridge and his officers and crew were taken prisoner, and their ship, anchored in the harbor with its 36 cannons aimed outward, was readied to fire at American ships.

On the night of February 16, 1804, Lieutenant Stephen Decatur, Jr. and a small contingent of U.S. Marines, aboard a captured Tripolitan ship rechristened the *USS Intrepid*, sailed up to the captured ship under cover of darkness and, climbing on board, were able to overwhelm the ship’s guards. With the support of American ships, the raiders set fire to the *Philadelphia*, denying its use to the enemy. The raid made a national hero of Decatur and was called by British Lord Admiral Horatio Nelson “the most bold and daring act of the age.”

The turning point of the war did not come, however, until the Battle of Derna in April and May of 1805. William Eaton, the former consul to Tunis, now bearing the rank of general, and First Lieutenant Presley O’Bannon of the U.S. Marines, led a force of eight Marines and 500 Greek, Arab, and Berber mercenaries on a march across the desert from Alexandria, Egypt, to the Tripolitan city of Derna. With the assault and capture of the city, the United States flag was raised in victory for the first time on foreign soil.

News of the defeat further weakened the resolve of Yusuf Karamanli, already worn down by the blockade and raids by his American foes. He also feared a U.S.-backed scheme to restore his deposed brother, Hamet, as ruler. The Pasha, on June 10, 1805, signed a Treaty of Peace and Amity, calling for an end to the raids on American shipping and requiring that

The Bashaw of Tripoli shall deliver up to the American Squadron now off Tripoli, all the Americans in his possession; and all the Subjects of the Bashaw of Tripoli now in the power of the United States of America shall be delivered up to him; and as the number of Americans in possession of the Bashaw of Tripoli amounts to Three Hundred Persons, more or less; and the number of Tripolino Subjects in the power of the Americans to about, One Hundred more or less; The Bashaw of Tripoli shall receive from the United States of America, the sum of Sixty Thousand Dollars, as a payment for the difference between the Prisoners herein mentioned.

Jefferson maintained the \$60,000 was ransom for the prisoners and not tribute. To Eaton, it was a distinction without a difference. The former consul was furious that the President did not insist on release of the prisoners and the other conditions of the treaty without payment of any kind. He was outraged, too, that his government had pulled the plug on the plot to supplant Yusuf with Hamet Karamanli.

“Our too credulous ally is sacrificed to a policy, at the recollection of which, honor recoils and humanity



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bleeds,” Eaton declared. In *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power* (2002), Max Boot observed that Eaton would have been even more outraged had he known of a secret provision to the treaty. “Yusuf was allowed to keep Hamid’s (or Hamet’s) family for several years as hostages to his continuing good behavior.” Eaton would rage for years against the Jefferson administration, venting his wrath most vehemently against Tobias Lear, the consul general to Tripoli, accusing the diplomat of “treason against the character of the nation.”

The Navy that was built to battle the pirate ships would serve the young Republic well when the former colonies of the British Empire clashed again with the “mother country” in the War of 1812. But Algiers continued to harass American shipping, seizing vessels and demanding more tribute. In 1814, the Dey of Algiers sided with Britain and declared war on the United States. When the Treaty of Ghent later that year brought an end to the war with Britain, America turned its attention again to the Mediterranean. President James Madison dispatched two squadrons, one led by Stephen Decatur, Jr., the other by William Bainbridge.

On June 17, 1815, Decatur, aboard the *Guerrier* with its 44 guns, led 10 warships into battle and captured the Algerian *Mashuda* and its 46 guns. The battle was among the most one-sided in naval history. Thirty men were killed and more than 130 wounded on the Algiers ship, while Americans took 406 prisoners. Only one American was killed and three wounded. Eleven days later, Decatur sailed into Algiers harbor and offered terms of peace that included an end of the tribute America had been paying since 1796. Decatur informed the ruling Turk, Omar the Aga, that he could accept the terms or receive “tribute” in the form of shot and shells. The humbled ruler complied and released the 10 Americans he held prisoner, and paid the United States \$10,000 in compensation. Decatur sailed on to Tunis, where he won similar concessions, coming away with \$46,000 for the United States. Finally, he went to Tripoli, where Yusuf Karamanli agreed to release the 10 Europeans he held, having no American captives at the time. He also agreed to pay the United States \$25,000 in compensation.

The Barbary Wars had been brought at last to a conclusion that was satisfying to all Americans — or almost all. “The only American unhappy about the outcome,” wrote Boot, “was Commodore William Bainbridge, who grumbled, ‘I have been deprived of the opportunity of either fighting or negotiating.’”

Many of the features of that 15-year war seem hauntingly similar to the themes and events recurrent in America during the past quarter century: the trading with Iran of arms for hostages in the 1980s; the clash of East and West and of Islamic and Christian civilizations; debates over the war powers of the President and the costs of war. The nations whose favor America now tries to curry with economic and military aid are not, as far as we know, demanding tribute from the world’s reigning superpower. But we are in a new War on Terror, with no end in sight. Unlike the Vietnam War, no one is claiming to see “the light at the end of the tunnel.” Our situation is more like the one John Adams foresaw when he cautioned: “We ought not to fight them at all unless we determine to fight forever.”



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