

# America and the Barbary Pirates: An International Battle Against an Unconventional Foe

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by Gerard W. Gawalt

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Ruthless, unconventional foes are not new to the United States of America. More than two hundred years ago the newly established United States made its first attempt to fight an overseas battle to protect its private citizens by building an international coalition against an unconventional enemy. Then the enemies were pirates and piracy. The focus of the United States and a proposed international coalition was the Barbary Pirates of North Africa.

Pirate ships and crews from the North African states of Tripoli, Tunis, Morocco, and Algiers (the Barbary Coast) were the scourge of the Mediterranean. Capturing merchant ships and holding their crews for ransom provided the rulers of these nations with wealth and naval power. In fact, the Roman Catholic Religious Order of Mathurins had operated from France for centuries with the special mission of collecting and disbursing funds for the relief and ransom of prisoners of Mediterranean pirates.

Before the United States obtained its independence in the American Revolution, 1775-83, American merchant ships and sailors had been protected from the ravages of the North African pirates by the naval and diplomatic power of Great Britain. British naval power and the tribute or subsidies Britain paid to the piratical states protected American vessels and crews. During the Revolution, the ships of the United States were protected by the 1778 alliance with France, which required the French nation to protect "American vessels and effects against all violence, insults, attacks, or depredations, on the part of the said Princes and States of Barbary or their subjects."

After the United States won its independence in the treaty of 1783, it had to protect its own commerce against dangers such as the Barbary pirates. As early as 1784 Congress followed the tradition of the European shipping powers and appropriated \$80,000 as tribute to the Barbary states, directing its ministers in Europe, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, to begin negotiations with them. Trouble began the next year, in July 1785, when Algerians captured two American ships and the dey of Algiers held their crews of twenty-one people for a ransom of nearly \$60,000.

Thomas Jefferson, United States minister to France, opposed the payment of tribute, as he later testified in words that have a particular resonance today. In his autobiography Jefferson wrote that in 1785 and 1786 he unsuccessfully "endeavored to form an association of the powers subject to habitual depredation from them. I accordingly prepared, and proposed to their ministers at Paris, for consultation with their governments, articles of a special confederation." Jefferson argued that "The object of the convention shall be to compel the piratical States to perpetual peace." Jefferson prepared a detailed plan for the interested states. "Portugal, Naples, the two Sicilies, Venice, Malta, Denmark and Sweden were favorably disposed to such an association," Jefferson remembered, but there were "apprehensions" that England and France would follow their own paths, "and so it fell through."

Paying the ransom would only lead to further demands, Jefferson argued in letters to future presidents John Adams, then America's minister to Great Britain, and James Monroe, then a member of Congress. As Jefferson wrote to Adams in a July 11, 1786, letter, "I acknolege [sic] I very early thought it would be best to effect a peace thro' the medium of war." Paying tribute will merely invite more demands, and even if a coalition proves workable, the only solution is a strong navy that can reach the pirates, Jefferson argued in an August 18, 1786, letter to James Monroe: "The states must see the rod; perhaps it must be felt by some one of them. . . . Every national citizen must wish to see an effective instrument of coercion, and should fear to see it on any other element than the water. A naval force can never endanger our liberties, nor occasion bloodshed; a land force would do both." "From what I learn from the temper of my countrymen and their tenaciousness of their money," Jefferson added in a December 26, 1786, letter to the president of

Yale College, Ezra Stiles, "it will be more easy to raise ships and men to fight these pirates into reason, than money to bribe them."

Jefferson's plan for an international coalition foundered on the shoals of indifference and a belief that it was cheaper to pay the tribute than fight a war. The United States's relations with the Barbary states continued to revolve around negotiations for ransom of American ships and sailors and the payment of annual tributes or gifts. Even though Secretary of State Jefferson declared to Thomas Barclay, American consul to Morocco, in a May 13, 1791, letter of instructions for a new treaty with Morocco that it is "lastly our determination to prefer war in all cases to tribute under any form, and to any people whatever," the United States continued to negotiate for cash settlements. In 1795 alone the United States was forced to pay nearly a million dollars in cash, naval stores, and a frigate to ransom 115 sailors from the dey of Algiers. Annual gifts were settled by treaty on Algiers, Morocco, Tunis, and Tripoli.

When Jefferson became president in 1801 he refused to accede to Tripoli's demands for an immediate payment of \$225,000 and an annual payment of \$25,000. The pasha of Tripoli then declared war on the United States. Although as secretary of state and vice president he had opposed developing an American navy capable of anything more than coastal defense, President Jefferson dispatched a squadron of naval vessels to the Mediterranean. As he declared in his first annual message to Congress: "To this state of general peace with which we have been blessed, one only exception exists. Tripoli, the least considerable of the Barbary States, had come forward with demands unfounded either in right or in compact, and had permitted itself to denounce war, on our failure to comply before a given day. The style of the demand admitted but one answer. I sent a small squadron of frigates into the Mediterranean. . . ."

The American show of force quickly awed Tunis and Algiers into breaking their alliance with Tripoli. The humiliating loss of the frigate *Philadelphia* and the capture of her captain and crew in Tripoli in 1803, criticism from his political opponents, and even opposition within his own cabinet did not deter Jefferson from his chosen course during four years of war. The aggressive action of Commodore Edward Preble (1803-4) forced Morocco out of the fight and his five bombardments of Tripoli restored some order to the Mediterranean. However, it was not until 1805, when an American fleet under Commodore John Rogers and a land force raised by an American naval agent to the Barbary powers, Captain William Eaton, threatened to capture Tripoli and install the brother of Tripoli's pasha on the throne, that a treaty brought an end to the hostilities. Negotiated by Tobias Lear, former secretary to President Washington and now consul general in Algiers, the treaty of 1805 still required the United States to pay a ransom of \$60,000 for each of the sailors held by the dey of Algiers, and so it went without Senatorial consent until April 1806. Nevertheless, Jefferson was able to report in his sixth annual message to Congress in December 1806 that in addition to the successful completion of the Lewis and Clark expedition, "The states on the coast of Barbary seem generally disposed at present to respect our peace and friendship."

In fact, it was not until the second war with Algiers, in 1815, that naval victories by Commodores William Bainbridge and Stephen Decatur led to treaties ending all tribute payments by the United States. European nations continued annual payments until the 1830s. However, international piracy in Atlantic and Mediterranean waters declined during this time under pressure from the Euro-American nations, who no longer viewed pirate states as mere annoyances during peacetime and potential allies during war.

For anyone interested in the further pursuit of information about America's first unconventional, international war in the primary sources, the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress holds manuscript collections of many of the American participants, including Thomas Jefferson, George Washington (see the [George Washington Papers](#)), William Short, Edward Preble, Thomas Barclay, James Madison, James Simpson, James Leander Cathcart, William Bainbridge, James Barron, John Rodgers, Ralph Izard, and Albert Gallatin.

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