

# **The United States and the Pirates of the Barbary Coast**

Joseph Frusci, Ed.D.

*Northeastern University*

## ABSTRACT

The United States was born into a very hostile world ruled by monarchies that did not wish this new democratic republic well. Piracy in the Mediterranean Sea along the North African Coast was a problem that the new American leaders confronted when trying to engage in commerce, trade, and shipping. The fledgling United States was considered to be an easy target due to the lack of protection for its merchant ships sailing into the Mediterranean Sea. Pirates seized and boarded these ships, and its crews were held for ransom or sold into slavery. This forced the United States to establish the United States Navy to help defend against piracy in the Mediterranean Sea, which in turn led to the First and Second Barbary Wars. These wars became America's first wars overseas after America achieved independence and led to gaining respect from the international community.

*Keywords:* America, navy, frigate, piracy, corsair, tribute, ransom, Barbary Coast, Tripoli, Algiers, war

# **Los Estados Unidos y los piratas de la costa de Berbería**

## RESUMEN

Estados Unidos nació en un mundo muy hostil gobernado por monarquías que no deseaban bien a esta nueva república democrática. La piratería en el mar Mediterráneo a lo largo de la costa norteafricana fue un problema que los nuevos líderes estadounidenses enfrentaron al tratar de participar en el comercio, el comercio y el transporte marítimo. Los incipientes Estados Unidos se consideraban un blanco fácil debido a la falta de protección para sus buques mercantes que navegaban hacia el mar Mediterráneo. Los piratas

se apoderaron y abordaron estos barcos, y sus tripulaciones fueron retenidas por rescate o vendidas como esclavas. Esto obligó a los Estados Unidos a establecer la Marina de los Estados Unidos para ayudar a defenderse contra la piratería en el Mar Mediterráneo, que a su vez condujo a la Primera y Segunda Guerra de Berbería. Estas guerras se convirtieron en la primera guerra de Estados Unidos en el extranjero después de que Estados Unidos logró la independencia y condujo a ganar el respeto de la comunidad internacional

**Palabras clave:** América, Armada, Fragata, Piratería, Corsario, Homenaje, Rescate, Costa de Berbería, Trípoli, Argel, Guerra

## 美国与巴巴里海盗

### 摘要

美国建立之初，全球正被那些不希望这个新兴的民主共和国发展顺利的君主们所统治。北非海岸地中海区域的海上抢劫曾是新的美国领导者在试图参与商业、贸易和海运时面临的一个问题。由于前往地中海的商业船只缺乏保护，羽翼未丰的美国被视为一个容易得手的目标。海盗夺取这些船只，并控制船员获取赎金，或者将其贩卖为奴隶。此举迫使美国建立美国海军，帮助防御地中海海盗，而这导致了第一次和第二次巴巴里战争。这一系列战争成为了美国独立以来的首次海外战争，并因此获得了国际社会的尊重。

关键词：美国，海军，护卫舰，海上抢劫，海盗，贡品，赎金，巴巴里海岸，的黎波里，阿尔及尔，战争

**T**he Barbary pirates, sometimes called the Barbary corsairs, were a collective that came from the coastal regions of what are now Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya (formerly known as Tripoli). Their leaders, known as Pashas and Deys, supported piracy, because it generated profits for those areas. When a foreign ship sailed into their waters in the Mediterranean, entry was refused until they paid tribute. Once they received payment, they allowed the foreign vessel to pass. If a vessel refused or could not pay tribute, the Barbary pirates seized the ship and crew and held them until their nation paid the tribute and a ransom for the release of their sailors. In many in-

stances, the captured vessel would not be returned to the nation of origin, but instead was brought into the fleet of the Barbary pirates.

The European powers of the 1700s and early 1800s (England, France, Spain, and Portugal) had over the years worked out an arrangement with the pirates, in which these nations paid annual tribute in advance. William M. Fowler, Jr., states, "for several years, paying tribute had been British policy."<sup>1</sup> This can be considered an insurance policy for their ships' safe passage through the Mediterranean Sea. England and France hoped to bankrupt other nations by driving up the going rate of tribute. They would do this to try to bankrupt their rivals so they would have unchallenged trade throughout Mediterranean Sea. According to historian Robert Allison, it is said that the English merchants once stated, "if there were no Algiers, we would have to build one."<sup>2</sup> Not only was this beneficial for England and France at the time, but by sponsoring them, it empowered the Barbary pirates to carry out these acts of piracy against their competition.

After independence abruptly ended that arrangement, American vessels were now on their own.<sup>3</sup> However, the United States would not have the same experience as England or France. The Thirteen Colonies were protected under the British umbrella of insurance. However, after 1783, the new nation of states was forced to deal with the problem of piracy on its own. At this time, no nation wished the United States well.<sup>4</sup> England certainly did

not wish America well; they were not good losers. Although France was an ally during the Revolution, they were now considered rivals. At the time of its birth, the United States was involved in border wars with Native American tribes and in naval conflict with revolutionary France.

One major problem for the United States government during the 1780s was that it did not have the available funds to pay the tribute or build a navy to protect its merchant ships. With no navy to protect them from piracy and no money to ransom the captives or negotiate a treaty, "Congress spent most of its time lamenting its weakness."<sup>5</sup> After the American Revolution, many of the ships used by the Americans were disarmed and sold to private shipping companies to raise revenue to help pay off the huge debt incurred during the war for independence. As a result, many American sailors were enslaved by the pirates and forced to build fortifications along the Barbary Coast. This went on throughout George Washington's administration until the problem became so bad that the United States was forced to act.

Thomas Jefferson was the loudest voice throughout the 1780s and 1790s but was unable to persuade Congress and President Washington to act on it. By 1794, however, the nation could not continue to pay the astronomical tribute. As a result, Congress passed the Naval Act of 1794 on March 27 and established the first naval force of the United States of America, known as the United States Navy.

The Naval Act of 1794 authorized the construction of four ships to carry forty guns each and two ships to carry thirty-six guns each.<sup>6</sup> This was a major idealistic shift for the young republic. Many statesmen at the time felt that a navy would be too expensive to raise and preserve, too imperialistic, and would unnecessarily provoke the European powers. In the end, however, it proved to be necessary to protect American interests at sea.

In March 1796, as construction of naval vessels slowly progressed, a peace accord was announced between the United States and the Dey of Algiers. In accordance with clause nine of the Naval Act of 1794, a clause that specifically directed that construction of the frigates be discontinued if peace is established, construction was halted. After heated debate, Congress agreed to continue to fund the construction of the three ships closest to completion. The first naval vessel to complete construction was the *USS Constitution*.

The peace accord did not last, because only two years later, the Barbary Coast pirates resumed seizing American ships, demanding tribute be paid to pass. John Adams was now President of the United States and he suggested paying the tribute. However, Vice President Thomas Jefferson stated that it was not a matter of business; it was a matter of honor. Jefferson believed that if America demanded respect through the presence of a naval force in the Mediterranean Sea, it would gain stature in the eyes of Europe. The disagreement lasted until the inauguration of Jefferson as the third President of the United States.

In 1801, the Pasha of Tripoli, Yussif Karamanli, demanded tribute of \$225,000. At the time of his demand, "United States revenues totaled a little over \$10 million."<sup>7</sup> The United States considered this too much money to pay as tribute. With great confidence in the newly established United States Navy, Jefferson refused the demand. Consequently, the Pasha of Tripoli chopped down the flagstaff in front of the U.S. Consulate. This was considered a declaration of war against the United States.

In response to the actions of Yussif Karamanli, Jefferson sent a group of frigates, comprised of the *President*, *Philadelphia*, and *Essex*, along with the schooner *Enterprise*, to protect American interests in the Mediterranean Sea and informed Congress. Although Congress never voted on a formal declaration of war, they authorized the President to conduct extended military engagements against those carrying out the acts of piracy.

The first naval battle was a victory for the United States when the *Enterprise* defeated the Tripolitan vessel *Tripoli*. Jefferson decided to have four ships, led by Commodore Edward Preble, already in the Mediterranean, to set up a blockade of Tripoli Harbor. This proved to be a tactical error and failure since the *Philadelphia* was boarded and captured by Barbary corsairs. The pirates took the ship and began preparation to add the most heavily armed warship in the area to their fleet. To free the vessel from the Barbary pirates would be impossible; therefore, it must be destroyed. But how? The answer came from Lieutenant Stephen

Decatur, commander of the *Enterprise*. In giving a great deal of thought to the problem, he now proposed a plan to the commodore. "No American vessel could ever hope to gain the harbor of Tripoli, but *Mastico*, with her Tripolitan rig and appearance, might well be able to penetrate without raising suspicion. Why not send her in with Americans hidden below, come up to the *Philadelphia*, board, and burn her?"<sup>8</sup>

The ship, its captain, William Bainbridge, and all officers and crew were taken ashore and held as hostages. On February 16, 1804, a small contingent of US sailors in a disguised vessel, known as the *Intrepid* and led by Lieutenant Stephen Decatur, Jr., were able to invade the harbor of Tripoli and burn the *Philadelphia* since he was unable to leave with it under fire, denying her use to the enemy. Stephen Decatur's bravery in action made him one of the first American military heroes since the Revolution. Admiral Lord Nelson of the Royal Navy is said to have called this "the most bold and daring act of the age."<sup>9</sup>

Lieutenant Decatur's status was enhanced by his courageous conduct during bombardment of Tripoli in August of 1804. In that action, he led his men in hand-to-hand combat while boarding and capturing an enemy gunboat. At the age of twenty-five, Decatur was promoted to the rank of Captain, which made him the youngest in the United States Navy to hold that rank, and over the next eight years he commanded several frigates.

After Decatur destroyed the *Philadelphia*, the conflict was kept to a

stalemate. It was not until William Eaton came to the shores of Tripoli with eight Marines and one midshipman that there was a turning point in the First Barbary War. Because of his experience in the North African region, he was appointed Navy agent for the Barbary Regencies in May of 1804. He devised a plan that would take the deposed leader of Tripoli, Hamet Karamanli, and put him in power in as the Pasha of Tripoli. He was the brother of current Pasha of Tripoli, Yussif Karamanli. From there, he organized a group of about two hundred Christian and three hundred Muslim mercenaries to begin the takeover of Tripoli, starting with Derna. From this march come the first lines of The Marines' Hymn, "From the Halls of Montezuma, to the Shores of Tripoli."<sup>10</sup> William Eaton led the attack in the Battle of Derna on April 1805. On April 27, the *Argus* and *Hornet* came into sight. The entire American force, land and sea, was ready to attack. Eaton delivered the ultimatum to the governor of the city.<sup>11</sup> Known as the first battle of American troops on foreign soil, it also established the Marine Corps as an overseas fighting force for the United States. Because of this victory, the United States flag flew on captured territory overseas for the first time in its history. The town's capture, and the threat of further advance on Tripoli, strongly influenced the peace negotiated in June 1805 with the Pasha of Tripoli.

The negotiated peace ended the capture of American ships and demands for tribute by the Barbary pirates. Although the Senate did not approve the treaty until the following year, this effec-

tively ended the First Barbary War. To some degree, the United States gained the respect and stature it was looking for at that time. The First Barbary War also proved to be useful experience for those who would come to lead the navy in upcoming conflicts. However, a few years later, the Barbary corsairs would recommence seizing American ships and demanding tribute.

Over time, the actions of the Barbary pirates were overshadowed with the growing tensions between the United States and Great Britain. By the time the War of 1812 started on June 18, 1812, the United States did not have the time or the resources to confront the Barbary corsairs. The removal of American naval vessels from the Mediterranean during the War of 1812 by the British navy further emboldened the pirate nations. Hadji Ali, the Dey of Algiers from 1809–1815, reacted favorably to British attempts to stir up the Barbary powers against the Americans during the war of 1812 by declaring war on the United States.<sup>12</sup> After the war ended, the United States could now focus on the resurfacing problems in the Mediterranean Sea.

In March 1815, Congress authorized President James Madison to initiate military operations along the North African coast. A fleet of ten ships was dispatched, under the command of Commodores Stephen Decatur and William Bainbridge. Both naval commanders were veterans of the First Barbary War. Decatur's squadron departed for the Mediterranean in May 1815. Bainbridge's command was still assembling and did not depart until July of

the same year, in so doing, missing the military and diplomatic initiatives that Decatur quickly and decisively handled with the Dey of Algiers.

Shortly after departing Gibraltar en route to Algiers, Decatur's squadron encountered the Algerian flagship *Meshuda*. After a quick action, Decatur captured it. Shortly after this, the American squadron likewise captured the Algerian brig *Estedio*. By the last week of June, the squadron reached Algiers and opened negotiations with the Dey. After unrelenting demands for compensation mingled with threats of destruction, the Dey surrendered. By the terms of the treaty signed aboard the *Guerriere* in the Bay of Algiers in July of 1815, Decatur agreed to return the captured *Meshuda* and *Estedio* and the Algerians returned all American captives. This was estimated to be about ten, and a significant proportion of European captives were exchanged for about five hundred subjects of the Dey, along with \$10,000 in payment for seized shipping. The treaty guaranteed no further tributes and granted the United States full shipping rights.

Shortly after Decatur set off for Tunis to negotiate a similar agreement with the Bey of Tunis and enforce prior agreements with the Pasha of Tripoli, the Dey repudiated the treaty. The next year, an Anglo-Dutch fleet, under the command of British Admiral Viscount Exmouth, delivered a punishing nine-hour bombardment of Algiers. The attack immobilized many of the Dey's corsairs and coerced from him a second treaty that reaffirmed the conditions imposed by Decatur. In addition,

the Dey agreed to end the practice of enslaving Christians.

Unlike after the First Barbary War, in which the European nations were engaged in warfare with one another (and with the US, for the British during the War of 1812), there was no general European war after the Second Barbary War. Consequently, the age of colonization allowed the Europeans to build up their resources and challenge Barbary power in the Mediterranean Sea without distraction. The Barbary states declined in power after the Second Barbary War. Algiers and Tunis became colonies of France in 1830 and 1881 respectively, while Tripoli returned to the control of the Ottoman Empire in 1835, becoming a colony of Italy in 1911. Europeans remained in control of the government there until the mid-twentieth century. By then the Iron-clads of the late 19th century and destroyers of the early 20th century ensured European and American dominance of the Mediterranean Sea.

Decatur's returning squadron marked the end of an era. Since its founding, the United States had been mostly embroiled in war, wars that had jeopardized the very existence of the nation. That was now past, independence was exonerated, and the American republic was firmly established as a national body with which to be reckoned. Much credit for this must go to the navy of the new republic.<sup>13</sup>

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## Notes

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