

A MORTAL AND MORTIFYING THREAT

IN 1776, SUDDENLY, AMERICANS WERE ON THEIR OWN. Previously, merchants from the New World blithely sailed the oceans in their brigs, sloops, and schooners, confident of the protection of history's most powerful navy. That security vanished overnight, however, with the outbreak of the Revolution. The massive British fleet that had once shielded American commerce from harm was now its lethal enemy. With no real navy of their own to defend them, American vessels were exposed to attack from the moment they left their moorings and almost helpless in the open sea.

The absence of a naval capability not only endangered American sailors but also imperiled the country's survival. Concentrated along the eastern seaboard, blessed with natural harbors and an abundance of superior shipbuilding wood, eighteenth-century America was in large part a seafaring nation, dependent on foreign trade. A blow to that commerce could pitch the fledgling United States, struggling to preserve its tenuous independence, into bankruptcy. As Continental troops battled against better-armed and trained British forces, the former colonies clung to their maritime lifeline. One of these led south to the West Indies, but another, no less critical route,

extended across the Atlantic eastward to the blue-water ports of the Mediterranean.

Stretching from the Rock of Gibraltar to the Levantine and Anatolian coasts, the Mediterranean basin represented one of the world's last remaining spheres free of European domination, where enterprising Americans could still seek their fortunes unchecked. Though the trip from North America to the Mediterranean was rarely pleasant, requiring six weeks' sailing time aboard cold, cramped, and unsanitary vessels, the profits often outweighed the hardships. Local merchants were delighted to exchange capers, raisins, figs, and other Oriental delicacies for New World commodities such as timber, tobacco, and sugar. A singularly brisk business involved the export of puncheons of rum—"Boston Particular"—brewed by the descendants of New England Puritans and traded for barrels of Turkish opium, which the colonists then conveyed to Canton, China, or brought home for medicinal purposes. By the 1770s, an estimated one-fifth of the colonies' annual exports were destined for Mediterranean docks, borne in the holds of some one hundred American ships. "Go where you will," one British businessman in the area grumbled, "there is hardly a petty harbor . . . but you will find a Yankee . . . driving a hard bargain with the natives."¹

Prior to the Revolution, the only major threat to America's vital Mediterranean trade came from the Middle East. Styling themselves as mujahideen—warriors in an Islamic holy war—Arabic-speaking pirates preyed on Western vessels, impounding their cargoes and enslaving their crews. These corsairs, as early Americans called them, sailed from the independent empire of Morocco and the semi-autonomous Ottoman regencies of Tripoli, Tunis, and Algiers, an area of the Middle East known collectively in Arabic as al-Maghrib, "the West." Westerners, though, had a different name for the region, one that evoked its notoriety for greed and ferociousness. They called it Barbary.

From the twelfth century to the eighteenth, Barbary was Europe's nightmare. Most of the men the pirates captured—among them Miguel de Cervantes, who based his first play on the ordeal—were sold as slaves destined for deadly toil in mines and galleys. European

women, prized for their fair complexions, fetched premium prices in the harems. Escape was virtually impossible. Mrs. Maria Martin, a British citizen purportedly seized by Algiers, told of being stripped, extensively inspected, and chained in a lightless cell for over two years, merely for refusing to serve as a concubine. In despair, some captives converted to Islam (“turned Turk”) and served their rulers as advisers and physicians, or joined the pirate navy as renegades. Most, however, waited hopelessly to be ransomed by their families back home, for few could afford the exorbitant fee.²

Though directed principally against Europeans, North African piracy occasionally claimed victims from the New World. The earliest documented attack occurred in 1625, when Moroccan corsairs captured a merchant ship sailing from the North American colonies. Twenty years later, seamen from Cambridge, Massachusetts, repelled an assault by Algerians, but in 1678 Algiers seized another Massachusetts ship and thirteen vessels from Virginia. Of the 390 English captives ransomed from Algiers in 1680, eleven were residents of New England and New York. “We had already lost five or six of our vessels by . . . pirates,” the Massachusetts governor Simon Bradstreet reported. “Many more of our inhabitants continue in miserable condition among them.” One of those residents was Joshua Gee, a Boston merchant who suffered “sorrows & exarsises”—forced labor, plague and occasional beatings—throughout his seven years’ captivity and who wept “tears of Joy . . . praising god . . . for his manifold merses,” upon his release.³

Pirate attacks against New World ships nevertheless grew infrequent over the course of the eighteenth century, as American vessels came under the protection of Britain’s vastly expanding and technologically superior navy. In their single-masted polaccas, xebecs, or feluccas, each with no more than twenty cannons and a few dozen armed men, the corsairs thought twice before waylaying a merchantman protected by a Royal Navy ship of the line manned by as many as 850 sailors and bristling with a hundred guns. For the British, North Africa was merely a gadfly scarcely worth a broadside, much less a war. Instead of resisting them, London mollified the Barbary States with annual installments of “tribute,” a reputable euphemism

for protection money. Bribed not to attack British boats, the pirates turned their attention to those of the less muscular powers, such as Portugal, Denmark, and Spain.

The safeguards for American shipping remained in place until the issuance of the Declaration of Independence, in 1776. Yankee merchants promptly became the targets not just of North African corsairs but, more disastrously, of the British fleet that had once protected them. The patchwork Continental Navy nevertheless managed to meet those challenges with the leadership of intrepid captains like John Paul Jones and the assistance of French men-of-war, but by the time the fighting ended in 1783, most of America's warships had either been captured, sold off, or sunk. The country was scarcely capable of defending its own coastline, let alone its overseas trade. "At present we are not in a condition to be at War with any nation, especially one [Algiers] from whom we expect nothing but hard knocks," Pierse Long, a New Hampshire delegate to the Continental Congress, justifiably lamented. Algiers's flotilla—nine large battleships and fifty gunboats strong—vastly outgunned that of the United States. Britain's Lord Sheffield, a notorious opponent of American independence, affirmed, "The Americans cannot protect themselves [from Barbary]; they cannot pretend to a Navy."

America Cannot Retaliate

Sheffield had reason to gloat. A national navy could be created only by a strong central government, which the country still lacked. Loosely bound by the Articles of Confederation, the states could not even raise national taxes, much less a countrywide military force. Indeed, the articles specifically ruled out the construction of a standing peacetime navy. And while the confederation in theory permitted any state "infested by pirates" to outfit warships for self-defense, in practice no single state was capable of generating the armed power necessary to ward off Barbary. America, moreover, could make war against North Africa only with the consent of nine of the thirteen states, each of which possessed the right to exercise "its sovereignty, freedom, and independence."

The reluctance of the Americans to forfeit their state prerogatives in order to present a common front to the world was reinforced by their aversion to international affairs in general. “No nation can be trusted farther than it is bound by its own interests,” George Washington warned, and no nations were deemed less trustworthy than the Europeans. Fear of foreign entanglements led many Americans to oppose creating a navy that could become embroiled with European fleets, or, worse, turn its guns on the nation’s nascent democratic institutions. Having just narrowly survived a confrontation with one European navy (Britain’s), many Americans were wary of any ocean-going force, even their own. There was also a financial consideration: warships were fabulously expensive to build, and, groaning under a colossal war debt, the United States treasury seemed incapable of bearing the burden.⁴

THE LACK of gunboats and the authority to construct them compelled the United States to overcome its aversion to European politics and to appeal to its Revolutionary allies, the French. According to the Franco-American Treaty of Alliance signed in 1778, France was “to use its best offices to . . . obtain . . . the immunity of the ships, citizens, and goods of the United States, against any attack, violence or depredation of . . . the States of Barbary.” But when America called on France to honor that commitment, the response was negative. French leaders were keen to promote their own Mediterranean trade and feared the impact of American competition on the southern ports of Toulon, Nice, and Marseille. Concluding that “there is no advantage to us in procuring for them [the Americans] a tranquil navigation in the Mediterranean,” Paris ignored the request.

Abandoned by France, Americans became easy prey for the pirates. In September 1783, Algerian xebecs reportedly harassed an American convoy sailing home from peace talks with Britain. “If there were no Algiers, it would be worth England’s while to build one,” quipped Benjamin Franklin, echoing the popular belief that the British were secretly paying the pirates. In fact, North Africa needed no encouragement from Britain or any other European

power to attack ships of a United States that was now defenseless, friendless, and too impecunious to pay tribute.⁵

The North Africans' impunity in raiding American ships was illustrated in October 1784 by the attack on the *Betsy*. The 300-ton brig was sailing from Boston to Tenerife Island, one hundred miles from North Africa's coast, when it encountered an unidentified vessel. With the aid of a double bank of oars, the supple craft swiftly closed in and aligned its gunwales with those of the cumbrous *Betsy*. Then, with "sabers grasped between their teeth and their loaded pistols in their belts," as one American sailor remembered them, bare-chested pirates in turbans and pantaloons swarmed onto the merchantman's deck. "They made signs for us to all go forward," another eyewitness recounted, "assuring us in several languages that if we did not obey their demands, they would massacre us all." Surrendering crew members were stripped of all valuables and most of their clothing before being locked in the hold as human cargo, headed for the slave markets of Morocco.⁶

Three months after the *Betsy's* capture, two more American ships, the *Dauphin* and the *Maria*, were abducted, this time by Algiers. Twenty-one American crewmen were fettered and paraded past jeering crowds to the court of the dynastic sovereign or dey, Hassan, who allegedly spat at them, "Now I have got you, you Christian dogs, you shall eat stones." A seventeen-year-old seaman named James Leander Cathcart recalled being cast into a dungeon, "perfectly dark . . . where the slaves sleep four tier deep . . . many nearly naked, and few with anything more than an old tattered blanket to cover them in the depth of winter." The daily ration, according to Cathcart, was a mere fifteen ounces of bread. The slightest resistance was punishable by bastinado (beatings on the feet), beheading, or impalement on iron spikes.

"Curse and doubly curse the Algerines for these pirates I fear have certainly made war on our commerce," raged the Virginia patriot Richard Henry Lee, a signer of the Declaration of Independence. Secretary of Foreign Affairs John Jay warned that the "alarming evil" of Barbary not only endangered American trade but also signaled America's weakness to the "jealous" powers of Europe. Unfounded newspaper reports of corsair attacks against American ships in the

Atlantic also compounded the panic. “The Algerians are cruising in different squads of six and eight sail, and extend themselves out as far as the western islands,” fretted the usually unflappable John Paul Jones. Yet, in spite of this aggression—real and imagined—the states never once contemplated retaliating against the pirates. Apart from banishing three Virginian Jews on spurious charges of spying for North Africa, America remained passive.

The United States had just achieved independence and already encountered its first acute foreign threat—from the Middle East. The capture of the *Betsy*, the *Dauphin*, and the *Maria* was merely the first of many instances of hijacking and hostage taking that America later faced in the region. Yet, uniquely, the Barbary crisis raised fundamental questions about the nature, identity, and viability of the United States. Would the states survive if they tried to address the danger individually, or could they join in an effective defense? Would Americans imitate Europe and bribe the pirates, or would they create a revolutionary precedent and fight them? Though the answers to those questions may seem obvious today, in the late eighteenth century they were far from unequivocal. “It will not be an easy matter to bring the American States to act as a nation,” Lord Sheffield taunted. “America cannot retaliate.”⁷

Innocence or Independence?

Before they could prove Sheffield wrong, Americans first had to engage in protracted and often agonizing debates over the essence of their nation’s constitution and character. Among the most outspoken participants in that dispute was the former governor of Virginia and principal framer of the Declaration of Independence. A provincial landowner who had never been east of Paris and had never fought in a war, Thomas Jefferson nevertheless insisted that he understood the Middle East and the need to confront it with power.

Much like his country—adverse to European politics but hungry for overseas trade, eager for national unity but protective of state prerogatives, committed to the Rights of Man while denying those rights to blacks and Native Americans—Jefferson was a ganglion of

contradictions. Alternatively foppish and unkempt, garrulous and tight-lipped, he claimed to be a man of the people while cloistered in his splendid Monticello estate. The conflicts between his effete and egalitarian sides, his republicanism and his Epicureanism, his pacifism and his ardor for France's blood-soaked revolution were just some of the many paradoxes that would baffle his biographers. Jefferson "combined great depth with great shallowness," conceded the historian Joseph Ellis, "massive learning with extraordinary naïveté, piercing insights into others with daunting powers of self-deception."

On few issues was Jefferson more inconsistent than in his attitudes toward the Barbary pirates. The owner of African American slaves, one of whom, Sally Hemmings, he almost certainly exploited sexually, he could not abide the thought of Africans possessing white people and violating American women in harems. The same Jefferson who warned against constructing warships liable "to sink us under them" could, in another breath, say, "We ought to begin a naval power, if we mean to carry our own commerce."

On one crucial point, though, Jefferson remained unswerving. Proud and parsimonious Americans, he believed, would rather "raise ships and men to fight the pirates into reason than money to bribe them." This peculiar "temper" translated naturally into the "erect and independent attitude" that Jefferson hoped would characterize American foreign policy, a posture that was inherently incompatible with payoffs. By deterring, rather than appeasing, Barbary, the United States would preserve its economy and send an unambiguous message to potentially hostile powers. "It will procure us respect in Europe," Jefferson held. "And respect is a safeguard to interest."⁸

In the fall of 1784, Jefferson was serving as America's "minister" to France (the title "ambassador" sounded monarchical to Revolutionary American ears) and its representative to various European courts. He first recommended that the United States act in concert against Barbary, joining with Spain, Portugal, Naples, Denmark, Sweden, and France. The combined navies would maintain a permanent presence along the North African coast, compelling its residents to desist from piracy and to take up a peaceful profession—farming, Jefferson suggested—instead. Unsure, however, of Europe's reaction

to the initiative of an upstart United States, Jefferson sought the help of the Marquis de Lafayette, the French nobleman who had aided America's Revolution. Lafayette duly circulated the plan, but the responses were overwhelmingly negative. While several kingdoms expressed an interest in the concept, they refused to contribute ships to any alliance and continued paying tribute to Barbary. The French rejected the very idea of coalition.⁹

For Jefferson, the response of the United States to his proposal was even more disappointing. Congress staunchly refused to allocate the \$2 million needed, according to Jefferson's math, to build a fleet of 150 guns. Instead, representatives allotted \$70,000 for purchasing what Secretary Jay called "the Influence of . . . Courts where Favoritism as well as Corruption prevails." Jefferson was crestfallen. The "Honour as well as . . . [the] Avarice," which he believed would preclude Americans from submitting to Barbary, European-style, had proved insufficient. Further predations were apparently needed to persuade his countrymen to act as a nation and defend themselves. "The states must see the rod," he ruminated. "Perhaps it must be felt by some of them." In the interim, Jefferson could only watch disgustedly as the bribe was proffered to Algiers.¹⁰

To conduct this delicate transaction, Congress chose John Lamb, a Connecticut businessman with no diplomatic experience, but who had once worked in the Mediterranean, trading mules. "His manners and appearance are not promising," Jefferson worried, but then consoled himself with the hope that Lamb, after all, was a "sensible man" with "some talents which may be proper in a matter of bargain." Lamb's incompetence was swiftly revealed, however, the moment he arrived in Algiers, in February 1785. Misled by the French consul Jean-Baptiste de Kersey, who supported the United States while secretly denouncing it to Hassan Dey, Lamb failed to secure the release of a single American hostage. Instead, he received a list of additional ransom demands, which included a portrait of General Washington, whom the dey professed to admire. The *Dauphin's* imprisoned captain, Richard O'Brien, a witness to this debacle, wished, "I hope never to see Captain Lamb in Barbary again except to buy horses and mules."¹¹

America's first diplomatic initiative in the Middle East had ended

in failure, but the fiasco in Algiers did not impede the United States from pursuing treaties with the other Barbary States. In fact, while Lamb was debasing himself before the dey, another American was attempting to negotiate with Tripoli, the principal city of modern-day Libya. The opportunity arose when the personal representative of the pasha of Tripoli, a nobleman named ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Ajar, offered to host John Adams, America’s minister to Great Britain, in his London chambers. Adams hesitated to accept the invitation, fearful that the discussion would revolve solely around tribute. The news of the mounting threats to America’s Mediterranean trade, however, convinced him of the need to make peace with at least one North African state.

To Adams’s censorious eye, ‘Abd al-Rahman at first appeared alien and ogreish, an “ominous” figure suggestive of “pestilence and war.” That initial aversion passed, however, as the envoy welcomed his guest with a pipe and a demitasse of strongly brewed coffee. In a hodgepodge of Italian, Spanish, and French, he questioned Adams about this new country, America, and the minister happily replied with detailed descriptions of his nation’s government and people, climate and soil. ‘Abd al-Rahman pronounced this “very great,” but then, without pause and to Adams’s astonishment, he characterized the United States as Tripoli’s enemy. The Barbary States were “sovereigns in the Mediterranean,” the Tripolitan explained, and “no nation could navigate that sea without a treaty of peace with them.” That peace, moreover, came at a price: 30,000 guineas, plus a 3,000-guinea gratuity for himself. A similar sum would be necessary for conciliating Tunis, ‘Abd al-Rahman estimated, and twice that sum for Morocco and Algiers. The total came to nearly one million dollars, about a tenth of America’s annual budget.¹²

“It would scarcely be reconcilable to the Dignity of Congress to read . . . of the Ceremonies which attended the Conference,” a dumbfounded Adams reported. “It would be more proper to write them for the . . . New York Theatre.” Notorious for his vanity, the minister was outraged by the impertinence that ‘Abd al-Rahman, the agent of a powerful but primitive kingdom, displayed toward the enlightened United States. He bemoaned the fact that “Christendom has made cowards of all their sailors before the standard of

Mahomet” and grieved over the prospect of paying off “unfeeling tyrants” who cared no more for their subjects’ lives “than . . . so many caterpillars upon an apple tree.” Adams shared Jefferson’s belief that America’s honor would be best served by battling the pirates, but he continued to doubt the economic practicality of war. Factoring in the loss to U.S. shipping, rising insurance rates, and the vastness of America’s debt, Adams concluded that it was safer to offer “one Gift of two hundred Thousand Pounds” than to risk “a Million [in trade] annually.” Adams was defiant in vowing, “We ought not to fight them [the Barbary States] at all unless we determine to fight them forever,” but battling the pirates, he still feared, was “too rugged for our people to bear.”¹³

Jefferson, the populist, professed to have a greater feel for the American “temper” than the rather aloof Adams and remained certain that the American people would fight against North Africa if given the means and the option. Nevertheless, as a statesman, Jefferson did not dismiss the possibility of a diplomatic solution to America’s piracy problems, should the opportunity arise. Thus, in March 1785, Jefferson joined Adams in London for one last attempt to prevent “a universal and horrible War” and reach an accord with Tripoli.

Before ‘Abd al-Rahman, the Americans reaffirmed the affection with which the United States viewed all the nations of the world, including Tripoli. The American people were eager to avert bloodshed, they said, and to this end, and under reasonable terms, were willing to offer a treaty of lasting friendship with Tripoli. ‘Abd al-Rahman appeared to listen intently to these representations, but when it came his turn to speak, he merely reiterated his original million-dollar demand. He then voiced a credo that would someday sound familiar to Americans, but left these founding fathers aghast:

It was . . . written in the Koran, that all Nations who should not have acknowledged their [the Muslims’] authority were sinners, that it was their right and duty to make war upon whoever they could find and to make Slaves of all they could take as prisoners, and that every Mussulman who should be slain in battle was sure to go to Paradise.

Adams had heard enough. The North Africans were guided solely by greed, he determined, and negotiating with them only “irritate[d] the Appetite of those Barbarians” and brought shame on the United States. Dubious of America’s willingness to fight, though, Adams still believed bribery to be the country’s only option. Jefferson similarly concluded that “an angel sent on this business . . . could have done nothing” to pacify the Tripolitans and he opposed further efforts to induce them monetarily. But Jefferson also persisted in asserting that Americans would take up arms to preserve their honor and well-being, and that peace with Barbary was attainable only “through the medium of war.”¹⁴

Congress, still reeling from the aftereffects of the Revolution, wanted to avoid war and, in June 1786, instructed Jefferson, together with Adams and Franklin, to negotiate a peace agreement with Morocco. The ruler of that empire, Sidi Muhammad bin ‘Abdallah, claimed to have been the first monarch to have recognized American independence and the first Muslim leader to seek a formal treaty with the young Republic. Congress dallied, however, and managed to offend the emperor. In retaliation, the Moroccans began seizing American ships, starting with the *Betsy* in October 1784. This indeed gained the Americans’ attention, and now, “Armed only with Innocence and the Olive Branch,” Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin set off to appease the emperor’s wrath. In exchange for a “gift” of \$20,000, the negotiators secured the *Betsy*’s release as well as a Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Ship-Signals. Thus began the longest-standing contract in American diplomatic history and the first one to bear an Arabic inscription and the Islamic date (“The Ramadan Year of the Hejira 1200”). The American consulate in Tangier, established under the treaty, would become America’s oldest legation building and its only national landmark abroad.¹⁵

Though he was one of its negotiators, Jefferson feared that the treaty with Morocco would remain meaningless as long as America lacked the “public treasury and public force” necessary to ensure compliance. He consequently recommended suspending all further negotiations with North Africa until the United States undertook “measures . . . which may correct the idea . . . of impotency in the federal government.” In the interim, the other Barbary States were

quick to emulate Morocco's method for extracting American concessions. No sooner was the *Betsy* released than it was once again impounded, this time by Tunis, and its name officially changed to the *Mashuda*.

These ignominies weighed not only on Jefferson but also on George Washington, the most revered American of the time. Having struggled to surmount his country's powerlessness in 1776, Washington now felt "the highest disgrace" in seeing America "become tributary to such banditti who might for half the sum that is paid them be exterminated from the Earth." Like Jefferson, he believed that the American people preferred confrontation with Barbary to blackmail, but they still lacked the warships to fight. "Would to Heaven we had a navy to reform those enemies to mankind, or crush them into non-existence," he confided to his former comrade-in-arms Lafayette.

Yet the reality remained that the United States had no navy, nor even a constitutional instrument for constructing one. "Without a national system of government, we shall soon become prey to the nations of the earth," the Massachusetts *Sentinel* editor Benjamin Russell wrote to John Adams. "Our sufferings are beyond . . . your conception," wrote Captain O'Brien, marking the two years that he and twenty-one crew members of the *Dauphin* and the *Maria* had languished in Algerian jails. A sense of national exasperation, of humiliation, spread. David Humphreys, a wartime aide to General Washington as well as a seasoned diplomat and poet, captured that vexation in verse:

*See what dark prospect interrupts our joy!
What arm presumptuous dares our trade annoy?
Great God! The rovers who infest thy waves
Have seiz'd our ships, and made our freemen slaves.*¹⁶

Under the specter of imprisoned sailors in North Africa and imperiled American ships, delegates from twelve of the thirteen states gathered in Philadelphia in May 1787. Their purpose was to consider replacing the Articles of Confederation with a more centralized national charter—to rectify the very weakness that had humbled the United States before Barbary. As honorary chairman of this Con-

stitutional Convention, Washington urged representatives to refrain from all “talk of chastising the Algerines” until “the wisdom and force of the Union can be more concentrated and better applied.” This request from the venerated hero of the Revolution could not be lightly ignored, and the participants in the convention avoided all mention of Barbary. But as citizens of a trading nation, they could not entirely evade the question of creating the navy necessary to protect that trade. James Madison, the diminutive Virginia aristocrat widely regarded as the assembly’s most dynamic participant, spoke for many of those present by reiterating his fear of a strong, standing navy, yet he nevertheless recognized America’s paramount need for naval power. “Weakness will invite insults,” he reasoned. “The best way to avoid danger is to be in [a] capacity to withstand it.”¹⁷

Though downplayed during the Constitutional Convention, the connection between the Middle East and the American federation figured prominently in the impassioned state-level debates on ratifying the proposed Constitution. The Reverend Thomas Thacher reminded the Massachusetts convention that the enslavement of “our sailors . . . in Algiers is enough to convince the most skeptical among us, of the want of general government.” Nathaniel Sargeant said it was “preposterous” to think that the United States could continue under the ineffectual Articles of Confederation and still defend itself from “piracies and felonies on ye high seas.” Support for the Constitution as a framework for protecting American trade emanated from across the country, not only from maritime New England. Hugh Williamson of North Carolina, a distinguished physician and astronomer, wondered, “What is there to prevent an Algerine Pirate from landing on your coast, and carrying your citizens into slavery?” The Kentucky attorney George Nicholas asked, “May not the Algerines seize our vessels? Cannot they . . . pillage our ships and destroy our commerce, without subjecting themselves to any inconvenience?” The only answer, both Williamson and Nicholas averred, was union.¹⁸

Such forceful reasoning could not, however, allay the concerns of those who still feared the expansion of central power, and many of the debates became protracted and bitter. In a determined defense

of the Constitution, Madison joined New Yorkers John Jay and Alexander Hamilton to produce a series of essays that were later anthologized as *The Federalist Papers*. These, too, stressed the necessary linkage between trading vessels and warships. “If we mean to be a commercial people . . . we must endeavor as soon as possible to have a navy,” Hamilton, the mercantile-minded realist, maintained (*The Federalist* No. 24), and warned (No. 11) that without a “federal navy . . . of respectable weight . . . the genius of American Merchants and Navigators would be stifled and lost.” Specifically referring to the North African threat, Madison affirmed (No. 41) that union, alone, could preserve the nation’s “maritime strength” from “the rapacious demands of pirates and barbarians.” Jay’s private letters reveal an even more pugnacious approach. Arguing “the more we are ill-treated abroad the more we shall unite and consolidate at home,” the secretary actually welcomed pirate attacks that would compel the states to rally against “the . . . dangers from . . . Algerian Corsairs and the Pirates of Tunis and Tripoli.”¹⁹

A more imaginative, if less remembered, attempt to marshal the Middle East in defense of the Constitution was mounted by Peter Markoe. Affectionately monikered “Peter the Poet,” the St. Croix-born and Oxford-educated Markoe had gained a reputation as one of Philadelphia’s leading bards and publicists. At the outset of the ratification debate, in 1787, he published *The Algerine Spy in Pennsylvania*, a satirical piece of Federalist propaganda. Presenting himself as Mehmet, an Algerian agent sent to scout out America’s defenses, Markoe praised political and economic freedoms guaranteed by the United States, but then mocked its lack of national cohesion. “Totally ruined by disunion and faction,” the states “may be plundered without the least risqué, and their young men and maidens triumphantly carried into captivity.” To hasten America’s despoiling, Markoe had Mehmet recommend seizing all of Rhode Island, the only state that boycotted the convention, and transforming it into a base for Algerian operations.

Publications like *The Federalist Papers* and *The Algerine Spy* helped tip the balance in the Federalists’ favor. The Constitution officially adopted on March 4, 1789, empowered Congress to declare war and “to provide and maintain a navy.” A threat from the Mid-

dle East had played a concrete role in creating a truly *United States*, a consolidated nation capable of defending not only its borders at home but its vital economic interests overseas. “In an indirect sense, the brutal Dey of Algiers was a Founding Father of the Constitution,” the historian of American diplomacy Thomas Bailey wrote. Whether Americans would actually use their newly forged federal powers to fight, however, was still questionable.²⁰ A vocal portion of the public continued to object to the notion of a large standing navy and recoiled from engaging in foreign conflicts. Many were reluctant to take up arms under almost any circumstances, preferring the “Innocence and the Olive branch” approach to Barbary to an “erect and independent attitude.”

Impotence and Indignation

Pacing the floor of his small Broadway office in New York, Thomas Jefferson continued to wrestle with America’s reluctance to wield power. After departing Paris at the end of 1789, he accepted an appointment as secretary of state, a post that accorded him an annual salary of \$3,500, five assistants, and the primary responsibility for resolving the Barbary crisis. The promotion brought little change in Jefferson’s opinion of the pirates—“sea dogs,” he called them, and a “pettifogging nest of robbers.” Jefferson was typical of the Americans who later viewed the region as the repository of despotism, depravity, and backwardness, a kind of inverse mirror of their own democracy, probity, and enlightenment. Certainly, to his mind, a band of Muslim holy warriors bent on enslaving innocent American sailors was far more deserving of whiffs of grapeshot than bags of hard-earned gold. But with much of American opinion still opposed to using force, Jefferson had no alternative other than to continue negotiating with North Africa for the hostages’ eventual release.

Through the good offices of Mathurin monks, members of a French order devoted to redeeming Christian slaves, Jefferson offered Algiers a substantially reduced ransom plus sundry *douceurs*, or “softeners.” The dey, however, rejected these gestures, and when revolutionary authorities in France suppressed the Mathurins, Jeffer-

son lost his go-between. Months passed in which he received agonized letters from the imprisoned Americans, many of whom were mortally ill with the plague. Suffering “perpetual anxiety for our captives,” the secretary felt that American policy was at an impasse, possessing the constitutional means to fight Barbary but still unwilling to employ them, “suspended between indignation and impotence.”

Finally, in December 1790, a dismayed Jefferson recommended that America go to war. “The liberation of our citizens has an intimate connexion with the liberation of our commerce in the Mediterranean,” he explained to Congress. “The distresses of both proceed from the same cause, and the measures which shall be adopted for the relief of one, may . . . involve the relief of the other.” Jefferson had championed Congress’s right to a say in determining foreign policy, likening the executive’s exclusive prerogatives in that field to those of an “Algerine” pasha, but he now regretted that stance. The Senate again rejected Jefferson’s call for war and instead earmarked the unprecedented sum of \$140,000 for the purposes of ransoms and tribute. The task of proffering the bribe fell to the secretary of state.²¹

Begrudgingly, Jefferson complied, but selected as his courier the man he believed would never buy peace from Barbary. The former skipper of the *Betsy* and the first American officer to raise the Revolution’s flag, John Paul Jones had earned a reputation as a skilled, if mercurial, captain. Jefferson, in recognition of his valiant service to the United States during the War of Independence, had helped secure Jones a commission in the Russian navy. Jones went on to score major victories against the Ottoman Turks and to develop a deep aversion to Middle Eastern rulers. Only by making war against the pirates could Americans become “a great People who deserve to be Free,” Jones maintained. Jefferson’s plan was to send Jones to Algiers with \$25,000, a paltry sum that the dey was almost certain to reject. Congress, spurned, would then appropriate sufficient funds to create a full-time Mediterranean squadron. “John Paul Jones with half a dozen frigates would totally destroy their [the pirates’] commerce,” the secretary reckoned, “cutting them to pieces by piecemeal.” Jefferson dispatched his instructions to the Paris hotel where Jones was billeted, but they arrived too late. The forty-five-year-old captain had contracted a mysterious illness and died.²²

Jefferson's next choice as courier, Thomas Barclay, a veteran of the negotiations with Morocco, made it as far as Lisbon before he, too, succumbed to sickness. A third envoy, David Humphreys, was sent, the same warrior-poet who had mourned "The rovers who infest thy waves . . . and made our freemen slaves." Humphreys reached Gibraltar, only to learn that Algiers had waylaid eleven more American ships, shackling an additional 119 sailors. There seemed little sense in entreating for the freedom of the *Dauphin* and *Maria* crews while Algiers was bushwhacking others, so Humphreys headed home.

A full fifteen years after declaring its independence, the United States still faced a devastating threat from the Barbary pirates. Some American merchants were reduced to counterfeiting the "passes" that Barbary issued to tribute-paying countries, which immunized their ships from attack. Others were forced to hire Dutch or Spanish gunboats at exorbitant rates to escort them across the Mediterranean. So acute was the danger that Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton wondered "whether on acc[oun]t of our situation with the Algerines it may not be advisable to procure a foreign vessel" to transport John Jay to Britain.²³

Popular opinion on the Barbary issue was changing, however. Americans were growing sick of the threat of hijackings, of skyrocketing insurance rates for their shipping, and, above all, of the debasement of their pride. George Washington, now in his role as president, swore to use everything in his power for "the relief of these unfortunate captives" in Algiers. He was also concerned about the latest war in Europe—revolutionary France versus Britain and other conservative states—and the presence of foreign gunboats close to America's shores. "If we desire to avoid insult, we must be able to repel it," Washington told Congress in December 1793. Agreeing with the president, Congress finally opened a debate on creating a navy.²⁴

Representatives who still thought that warships were too costly to build and, once constructed, were too threatening to peace and liberty opposed the motion. "Bribery alone can purchase security from the Algerines," argued Abraham Baldwin of Georgia, while the Virginian John Nicholas conceded "we are no match for the Algerines at sea." Citing the need to hire "a Secretary of [the] Navy, and a swarm of other people in office," New Jersey's Abraham Clark

warned that “the Combined [European] powers would find [an American fleet] a much better pretense for war.” To minimize America’s risks and expenses, Clark proposed that Portugal be hired to fight the pirates.

Such “pusillanimous measures,” however, were repugnant to John Smith of Maryland and inconsistent with “the maxims of the Republics of all former ages.” Another Marylander, William Vans Murray, recalled that the corsairs had “been at war with the United States ever since the end of the Revolutionary war” and had left Americans no choice but to fight. Fisher Ames from Massachusetts, a champion of unrestricted trade, waxed especially ominous: “Our commerce is on the point of being annihilated, and, unless an armament is fitted out, we may very soon expect the Algerines on the coast of America.”

In addition to financial and strategic considerations, the debate over the navy also took on a constitutional dimension, pitting the proponents of a strong central government against its many detractors. In a startling reversal of policy, Jefferson, allowing his fear of federal power to override his long-held desire to confront Barbary militarily, opposed the shipbuilding measure. His colleague and admirer James Madison even questioned whether the country possessed sufficient timber for the purpose. On the other hand, the Federalist leader John Adams, who had always doubted the American people’s willingness to fight the pirates, paradoxically supported the plan. The deciding factor, ultimately, was neither economic nor political but rather psychological. The majority of the members of Congress, irrespective of their feelings toward federalism, could no longer bear the disgrace of kowtowing to Barbary. The legislation passed narrowly, by a vote of fifty to thirty-nine, and only on the condition that the construction of warships cease the moment peace was attained with Algiers.

On March 27, 1794, Washington signed into law a bill authorizing an outlay of \$688,888.82 for the building of six frigates “adequate for the protection of the commerce of the United States against Algerian corsairs.” With a maximum armament of forty-four guns—less than half those mounted on Europe’s ships of the line—the vessels would nevertheless be lithe and formidable, ideal for battling

pirates. The U.S. Navy thus was born, a contentious but honorable birth, intended not to rule the waves but to free them.²⁵

The Navy nevertheless proved exceedingly slow to emerge. The frigate-building project became bogged down in contract disputes between the states and quickly exceeded its budget. American leaders who hollered, “Millions for defense but not one cent for tribute,” in response to French demands for protection money, still seemed willing to consider some form of payoffs to North Africa. Letters from the captives meanwhile reached the United States and began to appear in the press. Samuel Calder, master of the schooner *Jay*, wrote of being brought to Algiers in chains, naked and starved. “Death would be a great relief and more welcome than a continuance of our present situation,” he cried. Another captain, William Penrose, asked, “What in the name of GOD can our countrymen be about?” He warned that his crew’s imminent death would forever remain “a stigma on the American character.”

A guilt-ridden government was once again forced to scrounge around for redemption money—the Dutch first promised a loan, then reneged on it—and watch as churches and so-called benevolence drives rallied to raise the sums. Finally, in the summer of 1795, David Humphreys was ordered to try once more to “soothe the Dey into a peace, a ransom,” and negotiate a peace with Algiers.

Sensual looking, with an elegant nose, finely arched brows, and lips playfully pursed, Humphreys seemed well-suited to the sumptuousness of Portugal’s court, where he served as America’s minister. But diplomacy in the West bore scant resemblance to its practice in the Middle East, Humphreys soon discovered. Hassan Dey was coarse, rude, and temperamental. “If I were to make peace with everybody, what should I do with my corsairs?” he humored the American. “Surely they would take off my head.” Fears of mortality did not, however, deter Hassan from demanding a monumental ransom of two million dollars for the hostages. He also insisted on receiving two frigates from the United States, each with thirty-six guns. Further negotiations seemed futile.²⁶

In spite of his delicate appearance, Humphreys was a spirited bargainer. He managed to reduce Hassan’s demands and, on September

5, 1795, to obtain his signature on a Treaty of Amity and Friendship. The agreement was far from an American victory, however. Under its terms, the United States was still required to provide Algiers with a frigate, plus an assortment of *douceurs*—“25 chests of tea of 4 different qualities . . . 6 Quintal of loaf sugar refined. . . . Some elegant penknives. Some small guilt thimbles, scissor cases . . . a few shawls, with roses curiously wrought in them”—worth more than \$650,000.

Still, Hassan refused to release the captives until he had received his payment up front. To procure the cash, the U.S. government turned to Joel Barlow, a friend of Humphreys's and a fellow poet who had been living in Paris. Utilizing his European contacts, Barlow scoured the Continent for specie, but failed to find the quantity needed to satisfy the dey. “You are a liar and your government is a liar,” Hassan berated the broad-nosed, wide-browed Barlow when he returned empty-handed to Algiers. “I will put you in chains . . . and declare war.” Only at the last minute did Barlow manage to find a Jewish businessman in Algiers willing to lend America the cash and a ship to evacuate the hostages.

“Our people have conducted themselves in general with a degree of patience and decorum which would become a better condition than that of slaves,” Barlow attested in February 1797, after delivering the surviving eighty-eight Americans to Philadelphia. Much of the city descended on the docks to greet the liberated sailors, showering them with flowers and feting them with cakes and assorted spirits. “No nation of Christendom had ever done the like for their subjects in our situation,” a grateful John Foss exclaimed. “The United States have sent an example of humanity to all the governments of the world.” The dey, too, was delighted, and volunteered to help mediate similar treaties between the United States and both Tunis and Tripoli.

The two regencies were in fact open to agreement and quick to follow Algiers's example of first attacking the Americans and then negotiating with them from an advantage. Tripoli's Murad Ra'is—formerly Peter Leslie, a Scottish renegade—lost no time in pillaging three American ships, while Tunisian corsairs sacked the *Eliza*, a Boston schooner. Frigate-less, the United States could not respond

forcibly to this aggression; it could only send Barlow back to North Africa for another round of talks. He eventually hammered out treaties with both Tunis and Tripoli, at a total cost of \$160,000.

The government was now diverting as much as 20 percent of its yearly revenues to the Barbary states, paid out in gold or precious stones or, more perversely, in cannon, powder, and gunboats—the very wherewithal of piracy. So vast were the payments that the Europeans began complaining that the United States was overindulging the corsairs and driving up the cost of ransoms. “To what height is this Barbary system to be carried?” Barlow, disgusted, queried Jefferson. “And where is it to end?” The diplomat predicted that it was only a matter of time before the regencies again raised their tribute demands and renewed their war against America. But rather than heed Barlow’s warnings, Congress declared that peace with North Africa had been achieved and reduced the budget for building warships.²⁷

Outside of the legislature, however, many Americans had grown dismayed with their country’s policy of admonishing the pirates verbally while simultaneously coddling them with bribes. The mounting criticism was especially reflected in the arts. In 1797, Royall Tyler, a respected New England jurist with a penchant for novel writing, published *The Algerine Captive*, the fictitious diary of a ship surgeon named Updike Underhill. Captured and enslaved by the corsairs, Underhill endures “hunger, sickness, fatigue, insult, stripes, wounds and every other cruel injury.” Yet none of these inhibits him from excoriating persons who make “degrading treaties with piratical powers” and who furnish them with the weapons for extracting even more humiliating concessions. Tyler concluded his tale with an exhortation worthy of *The Federalist Papers*, reminding Americans of “the necessity of uniting our federal strength to enforce a due respect among other nations” and that “our first object is union among ourselves.”

Other writers joined Tyler in failing to understand why America, now constitutionally fortified and supposedly building a navy, was still bowing to North African dictates. “What, give it up tamely, and yield ourselves slaves, to a pack of rascallions, vile infidel knaves?” protested Susanna Rowson, the nation’s most prominent female

playwright and author of *Slaves in Algiers; or, The Struggle for Freedom*. A similar question was posed by an anonymous poet, a veteran of the Battle of Bunker Hill and of captivity in Algiers, who also supplied an answer:

*Does Columbia still disdain to own
A well try'd patriot and a free-born son? . . .
Then steer the hostile prow to Barb'ry's shores,
Release thy sons, and humble Africa's powers.*²⁸

Tyler, Rowson, and the nameless composer would all be disappointed. President John Adams, still doubtful of the American people's readiness to resist Barbary, continued to pay tribute and even appointed permanent representatives to each of the regencies. As if to emphasize the subordinate position of the United States, the liberated captive Richard O'Brien became the consul in Algiers and James Cathcart was sent to Tripoli. The position in Tunis, by contrast, went not to a former prisoner but to a government employee who had never before visited the Middle East or expressed any opinion about the pirates. William Eaton, a bluff and audacious young man, was nevertheless destined to become Barbary's most passionate foe.

The consuls assumed their posts in March 1799, shortly after America finally launched the first three of the six frigates commissioned by Congress. Floating a total complement of 124 guns and strengthened with detachments from the newly created Marine Corps, the *United States*, *Constitution*, and *Constellation* represented a small but robust force. The young navy proceeded to acquit itself worthily in an undeclared "quasi-war" with France in the Caribbean, where Napoleon's gunboats tried to block America's neutral trade with Britain. With the confidence gained from victories near its coast, America was poised to tackle even more complex and distant challenges abroad.

In spite of this assuredness, though, the nation was still uncertain whether or not to use its newly acquired power against North Africa. "These barbarians say that they have often heard of American frigates, but they have never seen any," Cathcart submitted in one of his first dispatches from Tripoli. "The conclusion they draw is that either we have none or would sacrifice considerable sums sooner

than send them into the Mediterranean.” Would the people of the United States continue to pay tribute, to emulate Europe, and to endure shame, or would they become, as David Humphreys hoped, “the Authors of the System for exterminating the pirates”?²⁹

America’s involvement in the Middle East had thus far centered on questions of power, both economic and military. But not all Americans were drawn to the Middle East for commercial or strategic reasons. Others were lured by romantic visions of the region, by their lust for adventure and their longing for new frontiers. The first of these Americans was John Ledyard, the world traveler and inveterate adventurer introduced in the prologue. For five months in 1788, Ledyard reported vividly of his experiences in Egypt, the heartland of the Arabic-speaking world. His descriptions would instill stark and astonishing images of the Middle East in the minds of many Americans, among them Ledyard’s close friend—and soon to be president—Thomas Jefferson. Previously, he, like the vast majority of his countrymen, regarded the region as a bastion of infidel-hating pirates as well as a realm of exotic wonders. The Middle East, for Jefferson and his contemporaries, was not merely the precinct of power but, more alluringly, a theater of myth.