

# Heritage Lectures

No. 940  
Delivered April 6, 2006



Published by The Heritage Foundation

May 4, 2006

## Victory in Tripoli: Lessons for the War on Terrorism

*Joshua E. London*

Over two centuries ago, the United States was dragged into the affairs of the Islamic world by an escalating series of unprovoked attacks on Americans by Muslim pirates, the terrorists of the era. These pirates preyed on unsuspecting trade ships. The hulking merchant vessels of the period were no match for the Muslim pirate ships, which were built for speed and lightning strikes. It was simply a fact of life that—over the centuries—took its toll on countless merchant ships and their crews.

Contemporary scholars estimate that over 1 million white Christians from France and Italy to Spain, Holland, Great Britain, the Americas, and even Iceland were captured between 1500 and 1800. The blood-curdling tales of brutality and horror that awaited Christians unlucky enough to fall victim to the Barbary Pirates were widely known, although sometimes wildly exaggerated.

The reality was often much more prosaic, although no less cruel. After seizing the cargo and scuttling the vessel, the pirates would strip the crew of anything deemed remotely valuable. The shaken, naked, terrified crewmen would then be dragged back to North Africa. There, they would be imprisoned and enslaved or, if they were lucky, ransomed back to their sovereign or their family or the company they worked for.

Often enough, however, the victims of these maritime hijackings would languish in fetid prisons, unsure of when, or even if, they would ever be redeemed. Many perished or simply disappeared in the White Slave trade. The only other escape was conversion.

### Talking Points

- America was dragged into a war with the Barbary States simply because of the religious obligation within Islam to bring belief to those who do not share it. Within the teachings of Islam, and the history of Muslims, this is a well-established militant thread.
- The Barbary pirates were involved in an armed *jihad*—a mainstream Muslim doctrine. This is how the physical *jihad* has been understood since Mohammed revealed it as the prophecy of Allah.
- Explanations like regional squabbles, economic depression, racism, or post-colonial nationalistic self-determinism are part of the propaganda that clouds contemporary analysis. But as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams came to learn back in 1786, the situation becomes a lot clearer when you take the stated intentions and motivations of the terrorists at face value.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/hl940.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/research/nationalsecurity/hl940.cfm)

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies  
of the  
Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis  
Institute for International Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Embracing Islam—“turning Turk”—instantly changed one’s status and prospects. Indeed, from time to time, some of these victims would prove rather able-bodied adventurers and mercenaries, considering their national identity, their religion, and their foreskins a small price to pay as compared with life as a Muslim pirate in North Africa.

### **Rogue States: The Maghrib**

Known as the Barbary Pirates, these Muslim terrorists operated under the protection and sponsorship of rogue Arab states. The Barbary States—modern-day Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya—are collectively known to the Arab world as the *Maghrib* (“Land of Sunset”), denoting Islam’s territorial holdings west of Egypt.

With the advance of Mohammed’s armies in the Christian Levant in the seventh century, the Mediterranean was slowly transformed into the backwater frontier of the battles between Crescent and Cross. Battles raged on both land and sea, and religious piracy flourished. It was also a lucrative business, one that yielded great riches to the pirates and to the regimes that gave them refuge.

In contemporary terms, this system of piracy was simply state-sponsored terrorism, an extortion racket in which the pirates and the petty North African states were all complicit—as was the Ottoman Empire, to which three of the four states owed at least nominal allegiance.

The European states disapproved of all this, despite their own robust tradition of piracy and privateering. After all, such practices were increasingly considered incompatible with a globalized world that was increasingly dependent on overseas commerce. Nonetheless, these mercantilist nations remained more or less content to pay the extortion and appease the pirates, deciding that it was cheaper and easier than trying to defeat them. Also, the stronger nations of Europe quickly realized the benefits of manipulating the pirates to stave off commercial competition.

### **Pursuing Peace Through Appeasement**

America’s struggle with the terrorism of Muslim piracy from the Barbary States began soon after the 13 colonies declared their independence from

Britain in 1776 and continued for roughly four decades.

After the War of Independence, America lost British protection in the Mediterranean and began worrying about Barbary depredations. In very short order, the precariousness of American interests abroad was brought into sharp focus when the American merchant vessel *Betsy* was taken by Morocco in October 1784.

Soon thereafter, two ships with a combined crew of 24 men fell to the pirates of Algiers—the *Maria* of Boston was captured on July 25, 1785, and five days later the *Dauphin* of Philadelphia was taken. The hostage crisis was significant, and Congress became greatly alarmed. Destitute of finances and military might, however, the United States pursued a multilateral diplomatic effort at peace. Consequently, between 1785 and 1793, a total of 13 ships and 119 men were taken by Algiers.

Obviously, the way forward was deemed to be the pursuit of peace treaties—appeasing terrorism. In 1792, for instance, Congress hoped for a peace treaty with Algiers that was to cost upwards of \$40,000, with up to \$25,000 to be paid in annual tribute. Ransoming enslaved Americans, it was thought, would cost an extra \$40,000. Unsurprisingly, these terms were unacceptable to the pirates—why, after all, should they settle so cheaply?

The peace treaty was finally concluded with Algiers only in 1796, and the terms were far from appealing—\$642,500 in cash up front, followed by a pledge of healthy annual tribute and sundry naval stores. The total cost of this transaction, Congress later determined, was \$992,463.25, or about \$14,300,000 in today’s terms: By way of comparison, the entire federal budget for FY 1796 was \$5.7 million.

### **Washington Warns Congress: Be Ready for War**

Then, as would happen with some frequency, the situation in Barbary changed as new rulers came to power, resulting in new realities and forcing new deals. President Washington warned Congress in December 1793: “If we desire to avoid insult, we must be able to repel it; if we desire to secure

peace...it must be known that we are at all times ready for war.”

Suitably moved, the House of Representatives on March 10, 1794, passed, and on March 19 the Senate ratified, a bill that gave birth to the United States Navy. As the legislation states: “Whereas the depredations committed by Algerine corsairs on the commerce of the United States render it necessary that a naval force should be provided for its protection...” Six ships were authorized at a cost of just under \$700,000. Unfortunately, the birth of the U.S. Navy was no more exempt from the laws of politics than are mortals from the laws of physics. Thus, in an early example of pork-barrel politics, the ships were to be built in six different states.

As is the case today, party politics played a role in devising a national defense policy. The Federalists, led by John Adams and Alexander Hamilton, were pro-Navy, while the Democratic Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson, were anti-Navy. The pro-Navy party wanted to castigate the pirates, protect U.S. commerce and foreign interests, and assert American strength abroad to secure international respect and influence. Their opponents preferred spending money on westward expansion rather than on ships and distant enemies in foreign lands.

This was somewhat ironic, as Jefferson was otherwise a hawk when it came to the pirates and had previously argued at great length for a robust naval and military response. Jefferson even envisioned an international force, somewhat like what NATO is supposed to be today, that would be called into being expressly to deal with the Muslim pirates. No one ever took this idea particularly seriously.

Before long, however, national politics gave Jefferson his chance for hawkishness. Soon after he became President, the situation in Barbary degenerated.

### **The Coming of War with Tripoli**

President Adams, before him, had been constrained by the early peace efforts, and so was forced to comply with treaty obligations. These included the establishment of American consulates in the Barbary States and sending those regimes cash, armaments, warships, and naval supplies as

well as sundry bribes. As the demands of the Barbary Nations increased, the inevitability of war loomed ever larger. This was particularly so with the Regency of Tripoli.

In late May 1801, Jefferson, using his executive powers, sent a squadron under Commodore Richard Dale to deal with Tripoli’s ruler, Pasha Yusuf Qaramanli. Attempts to pacify him with money and bribes had already failed. Indeed, unbeknownst to the Administration, a couple of weeks earlier Qaramanli had beaten Jefferson to the punch. On Thursday, May 14, 1801, Qaramanli sent word to the American consulate that he was sending men over to chop down the American flagpole—the traditional method of declaring war in Tripoli.

Congress didn’t respond to Qaramanli’s actions until February 1802, when it empowered Jefferson to use the Navy in any way he deemed fit to protect “the commerce and seamen of the United States against Tripolitan cruisers.” Jefferson’s instructions to naval officers were explicit: “subdue, seize and make prizes of all vessels, goods and effects belonging to the Dey of Tripoli” and proceed with whatever measures “the state of war will justify.” Note, however, that war had not been officially declared.

Barbary naval warfare was to prove as frustrating as the earlier diplomatic dealings with its perfidious tyrants. So frustrated was Commodore Dale that upon returning home from the Mediterranean in April 1802, he resigned his commission and, glad to be rid of the burden of Barbary, retired to Philadelphia.

Jefferson then sent another squadron under Commodore Richard Morris. This effort proved even more ineffectual, however, and Morris demonstrated a rather thorough incompetence. He was relieved of command in August 1803. For his exertions, such as they were, Morris was rewarded with a court of inquiry into his conduct. Adjudged “not competent to the command of a squadron,” Morris was dismissed from service in the United States Navy.

### **“The Most Bold and Daring Act of the Age”**

Another squadron was dispatched under Commodore Edward Preble. Though he too would end up frustrated, the fighting officer from Maine

believed naval force was the answer to Barbary maritime terrorism and was determined to chastise Tripoli.

Preble's chief frustration was the loss, early in his tenure, of the *USS Philadelphia* under the command of Captain William Bainbridge. While chasing a small, insignificant pirate vessel on October 31, 1803, Bainbridge grounded the mighty frigate on an uncharted reef. This blunder was compounded by the fact that Bainbridge failed to destroy his personal papers after surrendering and abandoning his ship—without a fight—just outside of the harbor of Tripoli.

Consequently, Yusuf Qaramanli now had a magnificent warship—renamed the “Gift of Allah” — 307 American hostages, and invaluable intelligence about the American squadron and Preble's intentions. As the news quickly spread, American prestige plummeted to new depths.

While maintaining the naval blockade of Tripoli, Preble set aside his plans for a robust campaign and pondered his only two options for the *Philadelphia*: to recapture her or destroy her. The impracticability of retaking the mighty frigate forced the latter option. The plan called for Lieutenant Stephen Decatur to sail into the fortified harbor of Tripoli aboard the *USS Intrepid*, a captured enemy ketch, and come alongside the *Philadelphia*. At his signal, the nighttime raid would commence and his men, hidden below-deck, would swarm aboard *Philadelphia* and burn her.

On the night of February 16, 1803, the *Intrepid* came alongside the *Philadelphia*. As enemy guards, suddenly suspicious, raised the alarm, Decatur yelled “Board!” while leaping over the side. His men rushed the ship and overwhelmed the guards with their sabers and tomahawks. Combustibles were placed at key spots around the ship and ignited at Decatur's command. The fire spread rapidly and uncontrollably.

Just then, the enemy's gunboats and shore batteries came alive. Waiting until all his men were safely back aboard the *Intrepid*, Decatur leapt into her rigging as she pulled away. The successful 20-minute mission was over, and Decatur suddenly became an American naval hero. The mission had been styled

“the most bold and daring act of the age” by Admiral Horatio Nelson. Indeed, Pope Pius VII said the Americans by this action “had done more for the cause of Christianity than the most powerful nations of Christendom have done for ages.”

Preble also launched several attacks against Tripoli, but to no great effect. Frustrated with the lack of positive results and the growing costs of the war, Jefferson replaced Preble with Commodore John Barron.

### “General” William Eaton and the Fall of Derna

In an historic and unconventional move, Jefferson also sent an odd, obsessed, and self-destructive man to the Mediterranean to lead what amounted to the nation's first covert operation. William Eaton, formerly America's consular agent in Tunis, had developed a pet scheme to overthrow Yusuf Qaramanli. Named Naval Agent for the Barbary Regencies in 1804, Eaton, a veteran of the Revolutionary War and Indian fighter, sailed with Commodore Barron's squadron to Barbary.

The scheme was ridiculous. Eaton was to find Yusuf's exiled brother Ahmad, raise an army, march to Derna (the second largest city in the Regency of Tripoli), capture it, secure its harbor, foment rebellion, and then proceed to Benghazi and then on to the city of Tripoli. There, Yusuf was to be ousted and replaced by the U.S.-friendly Ahmad.

Eaton had managed to convince Jefferson that the mission was worth a shot and that it could be done cheaply. That was more than enough for Jefferson, but almost from the moment Jefferson gave Eaton the green light, he started to have his own doubts about it.

The expedition began on November 26, 1804, when Eaton landed in Alexandria, Egypt. Accompanying him was a small detachment of United States Marines led by Lieutenant Neville Presley O'Bannon.

Eaton steamrolled ahead to Cairo, picking up Ahmad and assorted “warriors,” and then embarked on a roughly 500-mile march westward across the desert. The newly self-appointed “General” Eaton was able to muster a roughly 400-man



army of European mercenaries and disaffected Arab fighters. Due principally to religious tension and mistrust, this motley army nearly collapsed into mutiny and bloodshed at nearly every turn. The only binding element was Eaton and his Marines.

William Eaton overcame odds that might have stopped a saner man. At the fortified city of Derna, in April 1805, Eaton confronted a force much larger than his own. His strategy was to lead a charge straight into the enemy's guns and, with the support of U.S. Navy gunboats offshore, capture the city. The effort was a smashing success. When Eaton's Marines flew the Stars and Stripes at Derna, it was the first time a U.S. flag had been raised in conquest in a foreign land.

It is this action, and the valor and conduct of the Marines, that is forevermore enshrined in the opening lines of the Marine Corps hymn: "From the halls of Montezuma, to the shores of Tripoli." The action at Derna also gave us the Mameluke sword that is worn on parade and formal occasions by Marine commissioned and warrant officers. The sword is patterned after the sword worn by Ahmad Qaramanli, which he carried while a refugee with the Mameluke in Egypt. Ahmad presented his jeweled sword to Lieutenant Neville Presley O'Bannon as a tribute to the Marine's bravery and valor. It is also the oldest weapon in continuous use by the United States Armed Forces.

The fall of Derna shook Pasha Qaramanli to his core. It also gave Eaton the momentum he had hoped for. The Pasha envisioned the forthcoming reckoning, Eaton the vindication and glory.

Unknown to Eaton, however, Jefferson had authorized U.S. diplomat Tobias Lear to negotiate a peace treaty at the same time that Eaton was undertaking his daring and dangerous mission. It was Jefferson's way of hedging his bets. Whichever effort succeeded first, the President would be able to declare victory.

While Eaton planned his westward advance in his head, an enormously relieved Pasha Qaramanli was busy cutting a sweet deal to end the conflict and retain his position. Consul General Tobias Lear negotiated a peace treaty with Tripoli. The United States agreed to pay \$60,000 for all American pris-

oners; agreed to withdraw all U.S. forces and support from Derna; and granted a secret stipulation that the Pasha be allowed to keep Ahmad's family hostage to prevent future mischief. The Americans were freed, peace was declared, and Ahmad Qaramanli was betrayed without a moment's hesitation.

### **An Elusive "Peace"**

Jefferson declared "victory," but the "peace" proved rather political. The Senate ratified the peace treaty with Tripoli, and it was proclaimed on April 22, 1806. The Federalists did not manage to derail the peace treaty, although they did manage to embarrass and, at junctures, discredit President Thomas Jefferson and forever tarnish the career of Tobias Lear. Five years later, the now alcoholic, 47-year-old William Eaton died in anonymity. For what it is worth, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison saw to it that Lear continued in government employ until his death. He committed suicide in 1816 and left no note.

The piracy didn't actually end there, however. America simply chose to ignore it as more pressing matters took center stage.

Finally, in 1815, Barbary piracy once again emerged atop the country's national priorities. The War of 1812 finally over and the Treaty of Ghent ratified, President James Madison was at last able to concentrate on the situation in the Mediterranean. Once again, diplomacy had failed. Again, bribery had also failed—the money was never enough.

Unlike Thomas Jefferson, Madison was eager to pursue the war against the Barbary terrorism with real gusto. On March 2, 1815, Madison secured a declaration of war from Congress. He sent two squadrons under Commodores William Bainbridge and Stephen Decatur to deal with the Barbary tyrants.

Decatur reached Barbary first. He quickly defeated the enemy at sea and forced tough new peace treaties on American terms, "dictated at the mouths of our cannon." These new terms finally spelled victory. This was the first time any nation had successfully stood up to the Barbary Pirates. It was sufficient to ignite the imagination of the European powers to rise up against Barbary and take action.

In late August 1816, a combined British and Dutch fleet under the command of Lord Exmouth unleashed hell upon Algiers, effectually ending piracy against most of Europe—excepting France. The French eventually grew tired of Barbary as well and sent an invasion force in May 1830. France conquered the city and regency of Algiers and remained there until they were finally chased out in 1962.

### Lessons for the War on Terrorism

Although there is much in the history of America's wars with the Barbary pirates that is of direct relevance to the current global war on terrorism, one aspect seems particularly instructive to informing our understanding of contemporary affairs. Very simply put, the Barbary pirates were committed, militant Muslims who meant to do exactly what they said.

Take, for example, the 1786 meeting in London of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Sidi Haji Abdul Rahman Adja, the Tripolitan ambassador to Britain. As American ambassadors to France and Britain, respectively, Jefferson and Adams met with Ambassador Adja to negotiate a peace treaty and protect the United States from the threat of Barbary piracy.

These future United States Presidents questioned the ambassador as to why his government was so hostile to the new American republic even though America had done nothing to provoke any such animosity. Ambassador Adja answered them, as they reported to the Continental Congress,

that it was founded on the Laws of their Prophet, that it was written in their Koran, that all nations who should not have acknowledged their authority were sinners, that it was their right and duty to make war upon 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.

Sound familiar?

Note that America's Barbary experience took place well before colonialism entered the lands of Islam, before there were any oil interests dragging

the U.S. into the fray, and long before the founding of the state of Israel.

America became entangled in the Islamic world and was dragged into a war with the Barbary States simply because of the religious obligation within Islam to bring belief to those who do not share it. This is not something limited to "radical" or "fundamentalist" Muslims—which is not to say that such obligations lead inevitably to physical conflict, at least not in principle. After all, peaceful proselytizing among various religious groups continues apace throughout the world; but within the teachings of Islam, and the history of Muslims, this is a well-established militant thread.

The Islamic basis for piracy in the Mediterranean was an old doctrine relating to the physical or armed *jihad*, or struggle. To Muslims in the heyday of Barbary piracy, there were, at least in principle, only two forces at play in the world: the *Dar al-Islam*, or House of Islam, and the *Dar al-Harb*, or House of War. The House of Islam meant Muslim governance and the unrivaled authority of the *sharia*, Islam's complex system of holy law. The House of War was simply everything that fell outside of the House of Islam—that area of the globe not under Muslim authority, where the infidel ruled. For Muslims, these two houses were perpetually at war—at least until mankind should finally embrace Allah and his teachings as revealed through his prophet, Mohammed.

The point of *jihad* is not to convert by force, but to remove the obstacles to the infidels' conversion so that they shall either convert or become a *dhimmi* (a non-Muslim who accepts Islamic dominion) and pay the *jizya*, or poll tax. The goal is to bring all of the *Dar al-Harb* into the peace of the *Dar al-Islam* and to eradicate unbelief. The Koran also promises rewards to those who fight in the *jihad*: plunder and glory in this world and the delights of paradise in the next.

Although the piratical activities of Barbary genuinely degenerated over the centuries from pure considerations of the glory of *jihad* to less grandiose visions of booty and state revenues, it is important to remember that the religious foundations of the institution of piracy remained central. Even after it became commonplace for the pirate captains or their

crews to be renegade Europeans, it was essential that these former Christians “turn Turk” and convert to Islam before they could be accorded the honor of engagement in *al-jihad fil-bahr*, the holy war at sea.

In fact, the peoples of Barbary continued to consider the pirates as holy warriors even after the Barbary rulers began to allow non-religious commitments to command their strategic use of piracy. The changes that the religious institution of piracy underwent were natural, if pathological. Just as the concept of *jihad* is invoked by Muslim terrorists today to legitimize suicide bombings of noncombatants for political gain, so too *al-jihad fil-bahr*, the holy war at sea, served as the cornerstone of the Barbary States’ interaction with Christendom.

The Barbary pirates were not a “radical” or “fundamentalist” sect that had twisted religious doctrine for power and politics, or that came to recast aspects of their faith out of some form of insanity. They were simply a North African warrior caste involved in an armed *jihad*—a mainstream Muslim doctrine. This is how the Muslims understood Barbary piracy and armed *jihad* at the time—and, indeed, how the physical *jihad* has been understood since Mohammed revealed it as the prophecy of Allah.

## Conclusion

Obviously, and thankfully, not every Muslim is obligated, or even really inclined, to take up this

*jihad*. Indeed, many Muslims are loath to personally embrace this physical struggle. But that does not mean they are all opposed to such a struggle any more than the choice of many Westerners not to join the police force or the armed services means they do not support those institutions.

It is very easy to chalk it all up to regional squabbles, economic depression, racism, or post-colonial nationalistic self-determinism. Such explanations undoubtedly enter into part of the equation: They are already part of the propaganda that clouds contemporary analysis. But as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams came to learn back in 1786, the situation becomes a lot clearer when you listen to the stated intentions and motivations of the terrorists and take them at face value.

—Joshua E. London is Deputy Director for Public Affairs with the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America and author of *Victory in Tripoli: How America’s War with the Barbary Pirates Established the U.S. Navy and Shaped a Nation* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 2005). He has written on politics and public policy for the *American Spectator*, *Human Events*, *National Review Online*, and *Details: Promoting Jewish Conservative Values* and holds an M.A. in Social Science from the University of Chicago and a B.A. in Political Science from the University of California, Davis.