Avast! How the US Built a Navy, Sent in the Marines, and Faced Down the Barbary Pirates

by Christopher L. Miller

"The Attack Made on Tripoli, 3d. August 1804," by John Guerrazzi, (London, 1805). (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

In October 1784, an American merchant vessel, the*Betsey*, was on a trade run from her home port of Boston to Tenerife in the Canary Islands when she was approached by an un-flagged vessel. Suddenly, "sabers grasped between their teeth and their loaded pistols in their belts," pirates swarmed onto the unarmed merchantman and demanded that the crew surrender immediately. Pirates they were, but not colorful rogues in the Jack Sparrow mold, nor were they the precursors of privateers currently preying on ships off the coast of Somalia. And while they styled themselves *Mujahedeen*, they were also not Islamic terrorists or freedom fighters. These were, instead, official agents of the four Berber states in North Africa—Algiers, Tunis, Morocco, and Tripoli—practicing a long-accepted form of commerce and diplomacy. These were the Barbary Pirates, against whom the United States fought its first declared war after gaining independence. Crew members were stripped of their clothing and valuables and locked in the hold while the now hostage *Betsey* was sailed through the Straits of Gibraltar and on to Morocco, where the ship and crew would serve as leverage in Morocco's venture to open diplomatic relations with the United States on the Moroccan emperor's terms. Very shortly thereafter, Algiers followed suit, seizing the*Dauphin* and the *Maria* along with their crews. In England, the anti-American Lord Sheffield gloated, "It will not be an easy matter to bring the American States to act as a nation. America cannot retaliate."

Indeed, any sort of action on the part of the "American States" would have been difficult. There was no provision in the Articles of Confederation to address an issue like this. Not to mention the fact that the country was broke, in debt to its own citizens as well as to foreign lenders and lacking any economic infrastructure to turn the situation around. Americans could produce food for themselves, but that was just about all; the nation's economy had always been driven by trade and now, thanks to the Barbary Pirates, trade was clearly in peril. For the moment, the American consul in Algiers, Richard O'Brien, suggested that we follow a diplomatic course, writing, "It is bad policy to use any threats or make any parade with cruisers if we intend suing for a peace." As a major first step, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams met in London with representatives from Morocco to resolve the *Betsey* situation. Offering a "gift" of $20,000 to the emperor, the Americans hashed out a "Treaty of Peace and Friendship" dated June 23, 1786 (and "The Ramadan Year of the Hejira 1200"). Pacifying the Algerians, however, would not prove so easy. Following O'Brien's advice, Congress authorized a payment of $200 per captive to redeem the crews of the *Dauphin*and *Maria* but when he learned that the US was willing to pay, the ruling Dey of Algiers

demanded $1,200 a head. Still seeking a peaceful course, Congress complied. The Dey then increased the ransom to $3,000 per person.

The inconclusive dickering set off a great debate in the United States about what course to follow. Thomas Jefferson advocated using force. Working through his friend the Marquis de Lafayette, Jefferson tried to stitch together a sort of coalition of the willing composed of small trading states like Naples, Rome, and Venice who could take turns with the United States in patrolling the North African coast, bottling the pirates up in their ports. But this would require the United States to construct a navy, which John Adams argued was financially irresponsible when ransom would be cheaper. Moreover, he noted, "We ought not to fight them unless we determine to fight them forever." This debate came to naught, however, when the French foreign minister, Vergennes, ordered Lafayette to stay out of the pirate business because, Vergennes told him, the English and French governments profited from it. As Franklin once observed, "If there were no Algiers, it would be worth England's while to build one." Meanwhile, the Americans remained hostages.

It would be an overstatement to say that the pirate crisis forced the overturning of the Articles of Confederation and the adoption of the Constitution, but it was certainly a contributing factor. Unable to effectively pursue either a bellicose or a diplomatic course that might bring a permanent solution to the Barbary situation, it was referenced many times in the debates over changing the frame of government. But even after the Constitution was ratified and a more robust system put in place, solutions remained elusive. Now secretary of state, Jefferson advocated to Congress that it adopt a policy of force, and finally in January 1791 the Senate issued a resolution "That the trade of the United States to the Mediterranean cannot be protected but by a naval force, and that it will be proper to resort to the same as soon as the state of the public finances will admit." But public finances were not going to permit anything immediately and, frustrated by the Americans' lack of cooperation and emboldened by a treaty with Portugal, Algeria went on a rampage in 1793, seizing eleven US vessels within a matter of weeks. Finally, in the following January, Congress acted upon a direct request from George Washington to build "a naval force, adequate to the protection of the commerce of the United States against the Algerine corsairs." But by then, the French Revolution and conflict between France and England threatened the US even more ominously than did the pirates. To put off additional problems in the Mediterranean, Congress authorized a ransom to Algiers of $642,500 and promised annual payments in the form of war materials, including a thirty-six-gun frigate.

Jefferson was unhappy. In a 1786 letter to Adams he had made his case favoring war over diplomacy:

1. Justice is in favor of this opinion. 2. Honor favors it. 3. It will procure us respect in Europe, and respect is a safe-guard to interest. 4. It will arm the federal head with the safest of all the instruments of coercion over their delinquent members and prevent them from using what would be less safe. . . . 5. I think it least expensive. 6. Equally effectual.
But only after Jefferson became president in 1801 would his case be pursued, setting a dangerous precedent in the process.

By the time Jefferson entered the White House, Congress was shelling out nearly one-fifth of the national budget to buy off the Barbary pirates and they were still clamoring for more. During 1800, Tripoli had taken two US ships, the *Catherine* and the *Franklin*, and was demanding $100,000 in ransom. Tunis, too, was pressuring the US for forty cannons and a stand of 10,000 muskets as well as an American-built frigate of their own. Jefferson wanted war, but was convinced that Congress would not support it. He therefore asserted an executive privilege: by executive order he sent a

small fleet of American warships to the Mediterranean with instructions to protect US commerce, enforce existing agreements with the nations in the region, and to "chastise" pirates when caught in the act. But as this "police action" was unfolding, Yusuf Qaramanli, the Pasha of Tripoli, warned the American consul that "A delay [in payments] on your part cannot but be prejudicial to your interests." With no payment forthcoming, on May 14, 1801, Qaramanli ordered the flagpole outside the American consulate cut down: a colorful and effective declaration of war.

Although Jefferson had already dispatched a fleet to the Mediterranean, he was certain that it would not be adequate to deal with a formally declared war with Tripoli and concerned that the other Barbary states might weigh in at any time. He therefore made it known to Congress that more formal action was called for. They finally obliged by passing the "Act for Protection of Commerce and Seamen of the United States against the Tripolitan Corsairs" on February 6, 1802. This authorized an expanded force of five frigates and a contingent of Marines to "subdue, seize and make prize of all vessels, goods and effects, belonging to the Bey of Tripoli, or to his subjects." Command of the expanded force was given to Edward Preble, a veteran of the Revolutionary Navy and an experienced captain. Taking the formidable USS *Constitution* as his flagship, he led a force of fairly young and inexperienced sailors into the nation's first formal war.
The US Mediterranean Fleet enjoyed some immediate victories against isolated pirate targets, but success was not to last. At the end of October, the American frigate *Philadelphia* ran aground while chasing a shallow-drafted Algerian polacca. Despite frantic efforts to free the ship, hostile vessels soon had it surrounded and Captain William Bainbridge and his crew of more than 300 men were forced to surrender. Adding insult to injury, the pirates were able to dislodge the *Philadelphia* and haul it into port along with the prisoners. Pasha Qaramanli immediately renamed the frigate the *Gift of Allah* and prepared to put it into combat against the Americans. Disturbed at the prospect of facing one of his own ships in open combat, Preble consulted with his junior officers and came up with a daring plan. Rigging a captured ketch to look like a pirate ship, young naval lieutenant Stephan Decatur and a small volunteer crew sailed into the harbor with the mission of either recapturing the lost frigate or destroying it. They had to settle for the latter, burning the *Philadelphia*to the waterline. British naval legend Horatio Lord Nelson proclaimed Decatur's action to be "the most bold and daring act of the age," and despite the fact that it was an act of sheer desperation at a moment of defeat, Americans celebrated it as well.

But the disturbing fact remained that Pasha Qaramanli now had over 300 additional hostages and the Americans had one less ship of the line. At this juncture, the American consul in Tunis, William Eaton, proposed an odd plan. Yusuf Qaramanli had become Pasha by deposing his brother, Hamid. Eaton requested funding, troops, and naval support to topple Yusuf and replace him with Hamid, promising that the latter would be a reliable ally to the United States and would release all of the hostages with no further fuss. While no one in authority was enthusiastic about the idea, the new commodore in the Mediterranean, Samuel Barron, agreed to give Eaton a force of eight Marines and the use of three ships to ferry provisions. Eaton immediately repaired to Egypt, where Hamid was living in exile, rounded up the deposed pasha and a ragtag army of mostly mercenaries and set off across the desert to storm the port city of Derna. Once there, Eaton's force would be joined by a naval squadron that would assist in assaulting Tripoli itself, instituting regime change and ending the war.

Despite incredible odds and hardships, Eaton's force actually succeeded in crossing the desert, arriving outside the walls of Derna and capturing the city on April 27, 1805. However Pasha Qaramanli was not about to tolerate any continuation of Eaton's efforts. He sent a force of three thousand men to retake the city, but Eaton successfully defended Derna and then began making plans for the next stage in his campaign. At that point, however, events elsewhere intervened.

Nervous about Eaton's likelihood for success, Secretary of State James Madison had sent a new ambassador, Tobias Lear, to Tripoli to try to negotiate a solution. Realizing that he was in a precarious position, Yusuf agreed to receive Lear, who concluded a treaty with the Pasha on June 4. Through the treaty, the US returned one hundred Tripolitan prisoners of war in exchange for the*Philadelphia* captives and granted the Pasha $60,000 in exchange for the promise not only to stop raiding American shipping, but to defend the Americans against predations by his neighbors. Needless to say, Eaton was terribly disappointed when he learned that both the crisis and his dreams of military glory were now over. As for Hamid, he was so impressed by the US Marines in Eaton's little army that he gave his sword to their commander, Lieutenant Presley O'Bannon, initiating the tradition of Marines carrying "Mameluke" swords.

Back in the United States, the sense of relief was palpable, but not everyone was convinced that the problem with the Barbary pirates was permanently solved. Early on in the crisis, Jefferson had commented: "There is no end to the demand of these powers. Nor any security in their promises." Even so, things remained peaceful along the Barbary Coast until opportunity once again opened the door for pirate raids when war broke out between the United States and Great Britain in 1812. Almost immediately American shipping in the Mediterranean was interrupted: in September the American brig *Edwin* was seized by Algiers, followed by similar actions on the part of Tunis and Tripoli. In the midst of a war against the seemingly all-powerful British Empire, Americans could do little to prevent such incursions on the nation's sovereignty beyond advising merchants to avoid the region.

When the war with Britain ended, however, an American public flushed with nationalistic pride in having "won" such a lopsided conflict, pushed to flex its muscles again by exacting vengeance on the Barbary pirates. Now president, Madison was as reticent about a war in North Africa as he had been in 1805. Nonetheless, political pressure on the mild-mannered president was heavy, forcing him in March 1815 to ask Congress for a formal declaration of war against Algiers. Congress enthusiastically granted his request and a force of ten warships under the command of William Bainbridge and Stephan Decatur was dispatched to the Mediterranean to end piracy once and for all. Now hardened veterans after the many naval encounters with Britain during the War of 1812, the American Navy was nothing like it had been during its first encounters with the Barbary pirates. Decatur and Bainbridge devastated every enemy vessel they encountered, taking in all twenty-nine enemy flags (which they stitched together as a gift for First Lady Dolly Madison). And on the morning of June 28 the flotilla sailed boldly into the harbor at Algiers, trained its guns on the city and palace, and demanded immediate surrender. Decatur instructed the Dey that "If you insist in receiving powder as tribute, you must expect to receive balls with it." The Algerian ruler immediately agreed to Decatur's terms: releasing all Americans in his custody and, in a notable turn of the tables, the Dey was to pay the United States $10,000 in indemnities. Having settled matters with Algiers, Decatur's force then went on to Tunis and Tripoli where they concluded similar agreements. For his part, Decatur released all but a handful of his pirate prisoners of war, though he brought seven back with him to the United States where they were put on display in several New York theaters.

Thus ended the thirty years of recurring war between the United States and the Barbary pirates that had begun with the seizure of the *Betsey* in 1784. But this still was not the end of the story. At the Congress of Vienna, the peace conference that ended the Napoleonic Wars, the great powers of Europe concluded that piracy in the Mediterranean was no longer in their economic or diplomatic best interest and resolved to use all force at their disposal to end it permanently. Thus a year after Decatur's successful venture in the region, a joint Anglo-Dutch force attacked the Barbary Coast, making it clear to the pirate powers that they needed to seek alternative sources of income. Never

again would Barbary pirates haunt the sea lanes in the Straits of Gibraltar; the Golden Age of piracy was over.

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