



Forgotten U.S. History: The Barbary Wars

America's new belligerent engagement in Libya, along with its NATO allies, has led me to think of our old engagement in Libya, which inspired the U.S. Marine anthem, "From the Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Tripoli." Not only have most Americans never heard of that war fought during Thomas Jefferson's administration, but today's schools don't even bother to teach it.

About a year ago, I visited a prestigious private school in Oregon and was joined at lunch by a group of the school's best students of high-school age. I assumed that they were well versed in American history. But to find out if I was right, I asked if they could tell me what was the first war the United States was engaged in after we had established an independent government under the new constitution.

There was a moment of silence while they wracked their brains for the correct answer. "The War of 1812," they responded confidently. "No," I said. "That was not the first war we were engaged in." They seemed puzzled and disappointed. After all, they were the best students in the school. How could they be wrong? But they were. America's first conflict is known as the Barbary Wars, fought in 1801-05 and 1815 against the Islamic powers of North Africa.

The Muslims of North Africa had begun attacking and capturing the ships of Christian nations after their expulsion from Spain and France in the 15th century. By the 17th century there were as many as 20,000 Christian captives in Algiers. Ransom payments were the sole means of freeing some of the captives. Others were condemned to slavery by the Muslims.

Incapable of conquering the North African coast, the European nations were able to gain a modicum of immunity from Barbary piracy by paying an annual tribute to the governments there. Prior to independence, American shipping was protected by payments made by the British government. However, after independence, American ships were on their own. They were seized in the Mediterranean and their crews held as hostages subject to ransom or enslaved. In response to these depredations, the Congress voted in 1794 to build a navy. However, in 1795 and 1797, under Presidents Washington and Adams, the United States signed extortion treaties with the Muslim Barbary states of Morocco, Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis in order to protect hundreds of American merchant vessels from harassment in the Mediterranean.

However, in 1801 the Pasha of Tripoli, Yusuf Karamanli, declared war on the United States and seized several Americans and their vessels. In 1803, Commodore Edward Preble was sent to the Mediterranean with the *Constitution*, *Philadelphia*, and several brigs and schooners. Making a naval demonstration before Tangiers, which brought the Emperor of Morocco to make amends for treaty violations, Preble set up a blockade of Tripoli itself. On October 31, 1803, the *Philadelphia* ran on a reef and was captured by the Tripolitans, who anchored her in their harbor. But on February 16, 1804, Lieutenant Stephen Decatur and eighty officers and men recaptured and burned her in a daring night attack.

During August and September of 1804, Preble harassed Tripolitan shipping and fortifications with frequent attacks. The massive fortifications had been built by Christian slaves. Preble's actions reached a climax when the fire-ship *Intrepid*, loaded with a cargo of gunpowder and explosive shells, was maneuvered into the harbor at night. But the ship exploded prematurely, doing little damage to Tripolitan shipping.

Meanwhile, William Eaton, the U.S. Consul at Tunis, got permission from Jefferson and Madison to



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attack Tripoli by land with the help of the Pasha's exiled older brother Hamet, whose throne had been usurped by Yusuf. With the help of seven United States Marines, Eaton was able to organize a small army made up of Greeks and discontented Arabs who marched from Alexandria to Derna, halfway to Tripoli, in 30 days. The small army, led by the seven Marines, stormed Derna, which fell after a two-hour battle.

The Pasha in Tripoli was so alarmed by the fall of Derna that he signed a peace treaty with the United States on June 4, 1805. It abolished all annual payments, but provided for \$60,000 ransom money for the officers and crew of the *Philadelphia*.

But payments were continued to the other Barbary states until 1815, when Commodore Stephen Decatur was sent to the Mediterranean where he captured the Algerian flagship *Mashuda* in a fight off Cape de Gat. Appearing off Algiers, Decatur demanded and obtained a treaty humiliating to the once proud piratical state: no future payments, restoration of all American property, the emancipation of all Christian slaves, civilized treatment of all prisoners of war and \$10,000 for a merchantman recently seized. And so ended the Barbary Wars for the United States.

However, it wasn't until France invaded North Africa in 1830 and set up a permanent government there that the Barbary pirates were finally put out of business. France then encouraged over a million Europeans to settle in Algeria, making it a permanent part of the French Republic. The settlers created industries, farms, vineyards, and cultural institutions. Thus, Algeria became a productive part of France until the 1950s when the Soviet Union helped Algerian communists create a national liberation movement using terrorism to create fear among Muslims who were, on the whole, loyal to France.

French patriots brought Charles de Gaulle out of retirement to help win the war for France. But he did just the opposite in one of the most cynical betrayals in all of French history. He surrendered Algeria to the communists, which forced over a million Europeans and loyal Muslims to leave Algeria and settle in France.

Today France is overrun with Algerians who don't want to live in their own liberated state where radical Islamists have killed thousands of Algerians. And so, we are now fighting barbaric Muslims all over again. Now they are called al-Qaida and radical Jihadist Islamists who are preparing to become the dominant religious power in Europe.

Lesson to be learned? We are threatened today by the same kind of terrorism and barbarism we fought in our first foreign war. However, distinct differences exist, since U.S. ships have not been attacked by an Islamic state, nor have Americans been held for ransom. As for the attacks against our nation on 9-11, the al-Qaeda terrorists responsible have actually been linked to the rebel opposition in Libya, posing a problem to America in determining who is "friend" and who is "foe" in the Libyan conflict. An article in Britain's *Telegraph* for July 11 quoted the Libyan rebel leader, Abdel-Hakim al-Hasidi, as stating that "jihadists who fought against allied troops in Iraq are on the front lines of the battle against Muammar Gaddafi's regime." However, if an unmistakable enemy threatening American interests in northern Africa or the Middle East should be determined, a Congressional declaration of war would be in order, as our Constitution mandates.

Apparently, the Muslim world is reverting to its age-old barbaric practices, which forced the Europeans to fight back and subdue them in North Africa. Under the French, they were pacified and productive. Today, the Muslims have invaded France and believe they are in a position to conquer the Europeans. As the French say, "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose." The more it changes, the more it



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remains the same. Or perhaps better put by George Santayana: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”



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