

The First Barbary War

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When Thomas Jefferson was inaugurated in March of 1801, he inherited troubled relations with the Barbary states — the Ottoman Regencies of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli, along with independent Morocco. The United States had treaties with all four, but tension was high and rising.

American representatives in the region wanted an American naval presence. They regularly, if less eloquently, echoed the 1793 view of their colleague in Lisbon: “When we can appear in the Ports of the various Powers, or on the Coast, of Barbary, with Ships of such force as to convince those nations that We are able to protect our trade, and to compel them if necessary to keep faith with Us, then, and not before, We may probably secure a large share of the Meditⁿ trade, which would largely and speedily compensate the U. S. for the Cost of a maritime force amply sufficient to keep all those Pirates in Awe, and also make it their interest to keep faith.”¹ The new president was fully aware of the situation. In 1790, as Secretary of State, he had reported to Congress on the subject in some detail, and he had been directly involved in the region even earlier.²

In 1784 Congress had appointed Jefferson, [John Adams](#) and [Benjamin Franklin](#) as peace commissioners to negotiate treaties of amity and commerce with the principal states of Europe and the Mediterranean — including the Barbary states. Already in Europe, the commissioners quickly learned that the Europeans made peace with the Barbary powers through treaties that involved annual payments of tribute — sometimes euphemistically called annuities. The merchant vessels of any country without such a treaty were at the mercy of the state-sponsored maritime marauders known as corsairs, sometimes mislabeled pirates.³ The commissioners reported this to Congress and sought guidance.

The Barbary challenge to American merchant shipping sparked a great deal of debate over how to cope with corsair aggression, actual or threatened. Jefferson’s early view guided him in future years. In November 1784, he doubted the American people would be willing to pay annual tribute. “Would it not be better to offer them an equal treaty. If they refuse, why not go to war with them?”⁴ A month later, having learned that a small American brig had been seized by a Moroccan corsair in the Atlantic, he emphasized the hard line: “Our trade to Portugal, Spain, and the Mediterranean is annihilated unless we do something decisive. Tribute or war is the usual alternative of these pirates. If we yeild [sic] the former, it will require sums which our people will feel. Why not begin a navy then and decide on war? We cannot begin in a better cause nor against a weaker foe.”⁵ Jefferson was convinced this solution would be more honorable, more effective, and less expensive than paying tribute.⁶

In addition, he believed that America wanted to be a trading nation, and “to carry as much as possible” in our own vessels. “But,” he wrote James Monroe, “this will require a protecting force on the sea. Otherwise the smallest powers in Europe, every one which possesses a single ship of the line may dictate to us, and enforce their demands by captures on our commerce. Some naval force then is necessary if we mean to be commercial.” However, for the task then before him, he added, “if it be decided that their peace shall be bought it shall engage my most earnest endeavours.”⁷ And that

would be the approach John Adams favored. He believed that paying tribute would be more economical and easier than convincing the people of the United States to fund the building of a navy.⁸

Congress did decide that peace was to be bought. They authorized \$80,000 for negotiations. The Commissioners sent American consul Thomas Barclay to Morocco and Connecticut sea captain John Lamb to Algiers. In Morocco the draft treaty Barclay carried with him was accepted with only minor changes. Jefferson, Adams and Congress were very satisfied; the Morocco treaty made American vessels safe from Moroccan corsairs and there was no call for future tribute.⁹

The offer of an equal treaty did not work elsewhere in Barbary. Algiers was much more dependent than Morocco on the fruits of corsairing — captured goods, slaves, the ransoms they brought, and tribute — and less amenable to a peace treaty with the United States. While planning the Barbary missions the American Commissioners had learned that two American ships — the *Maria* and the *Dauphin* — had been captured by Algerine corsairs. As a result, Lamb was instructed to negotiate ransom for the captives in Algiers as well as a peace treaty to prevent further attacks on American vessels. This proved impossible with the limited budget Congress had approved.¹⁰

After the failure of the Lamb mission in 1786 Jefferson made further futile attempts to launch negotiations with the dey of Algiers, both from Paris and later as Secretary of State under President Washington. During these years American vessels in the Mediterranean sailed in convoy with European ships, often with Portuguese naval protection, flew European flags illegally, or ventured out at considerable risk from Barbary corsairs. In the Atlantic, the Morocco treaty provided protection from Moroccan corsairs and the Portuguese navy kept those from Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli in the Mediterranean. That was changed by an Algiers-Portugal treaty in 1793. In a very few months Algerine corsairs seized eleven American merchant vessels — at least ten of them in the Atlantic — with over 100 crewmen and passengers.¹¹

Jefferson was no longer Secretary of State in 1795 when America finally did make peace with Algiers, agreeing to pay annual tribute. The following year, once the US met its initial treaty commitments, the Americans held in Algiers were freed, including the few survivors from the *Maria* and the *Dauphin*. Treaties were also concluded with Tripoli, in 1796, and Tunis in 1797. Soon after, American consuls were appointed in each Barbary state.¹²

The news from these consuls that awaited the new administration in 1801 was distressing. Tension was particularly great with Tripoli. Pasha Yusuf Qaramanli, feeling slighted by the Americans, was threatening war. He was convinced the Americans treated him less well than they did the other Barbary rulers. He was right, but Tunis and Algiers had negotiated better treaties. In October 1800, five months before Jefferson took office, the American consul in Tripoli, James Cathcart, summarized the long, rambling messages he had been sending the Secretary of State and others for a year or more. In short, he said, the pasha's message is "if you don't give me a present I will forge a pretext to capture your defenseless merchantmen; he likewise says that he expects an answer as soon as possible, and that any delay on our side will only serve to injure our own interests...."¹³

A week after that was written in October 1800, a Tripolitan corsair took a captive American brig, the *Catharine*, into Tripoli. The pasha immediately ordered the *Catharine* and her crew released and dismissed the corsair captain. His explanation: he had told the president that “before he would take any measures whatsoever against the United States” he would wait for the President’s answer to his letter of five months earlier (May 25, 1800). Later, however, in a meeting with Cathcart, Captain Carpenter of the *Catharine* and local officials, the Pashaw declared that he wanted money from America, that he would wait six more months for an acceptable reply to his letter to the President, and that he would declare war on the United States if the answer did not arrive in that time or was unsatisfactory. Reporting on that public ultimatum, Cathcart explained to the Secretary of State why America owed nothing to the pasha and how he was regularly at war with some country or other from which he would demand beneficial negotiations. (He was then at war with Sweden which would soon agree to pay annual tribute and ransom for 131 captives; 14 Swedish merchantmen had been seized by Tripolitan corsairs since the angered Pasha had broken an existing treaty and declared war a few months earlier).¹⁴

The demanding, threatening language Cathcart reported to the Secretary of State was more explicit than the Pasha’s unanswered letter to president Adams of May 25 but no more so than the exchanges Cathcart had related then and previously. The consul had followed his report with a circular letter in November to American consuls and agents in the Mediterranean. He advised them to warn American ships of the possibility of hostile action by Tripolitan corsairs from the month of March, or possibly sooner, a warning he repeated in January after Tripoli made peace with Sweden. In February, efforts by the dey of Algiers and Cathcart to ease tensions with the pasha were fruitless, producing only more confirmation of the likelihood of war as the corsair fleet began fitting out.¹⁵ On February 21, 1801, in a new circular letter, Cathcart told the consuls and agents, “to detain all merchant vessels navigating under the flag of the United States, in port, and by no means to permit any of them to sail unless they are under convoy, as I am now convinced that the Bashaw of Tripoli will commence hostilities against the United States of America in less than sixty days.”¹⁶

With the Quasi-War with France ended by the Convention of 1800, the incoming Jefferson administration turned its attention to the looming trouble in Barbary. The new president very quickly made his decisions. He would arrange the payments long overdue to the rulers in Algiers and Tunis and following his convictions of earlier years he would send the navy to deal with the maritime forces of Barbary, of whose strength he himself prepared an estimate from documents sent him by the Navy department.¹⁷ The American navy had just been reduced to modest size, but its first ships had been commissioned in response to the Algerine seizures of American merchantmen in 1793 and it was time to show it in Barbary waters.

Early in June, barely three months after the inauguration a small squadron — three frigates and a schooner — sailed for the Mediterranean under Commodore Richard Dale. If they found on arrival that war had been declared, the squadron was to protect American shipping from the corsairs and to “chastise their insolence ... by sinking, burning, or destroying their ships and vessels wherever you shall find them.” It was also to blockade the harbor of any of the regencies that had declared war on America and, to the extent possible, was to convoy merchantmen when asked. In addition, Commodore Dale was to take to Algiers and Tunis letters, gifts for the rulers, tribute payments in the case of Algiers and assurances to both rulers that overdue tribute was soon to be forthcoming on

other vessels. And, he was to go to Tripoli. There he would deliver the President's letter to the pasha and, if still at peace, could give Cathcart money for a gift to the pasha.[18](#)

Jefferson's letter to Pasha Qaramanli emphasized "our sincere desire to cultivate peace & commerce with your subjects." Also mentioned was our dispatch to the Mediterranean of "a squadron of observation" whose appearance [we hope] will give umbrage to no power." The squadron's purpose, the letter explained, was to exercise our seamen and to "superintend the safety of our commerce...[which] we mean to rest...on the resources of our own strength & bravery in every sea."[19](#) Meanwhile, Secretary Madison wrote American consuls in the Mediterranean that the President, convinced "of the hostile purposes of the Bashaw of Tripoli" was sending a naval squadron to protect our commerce in the Mediterranean and to respond appropriately to any powers who declared war on the United States.[20](#)

Unfortunately, the pasha had not waited to hear from the new president. Yusuf Qaramanli declared war on the United States on May 14, 1801 by chopping down the flagpole at the American consulate in Tripoli.[21](#)

On arrival at Gibraltar July 1, Commodore Dale learned we were at war with Tripoli. During the next few months, squadron vessels blocked two Tripolitan corsairs in Gibraltar, delivered goods and messages in Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli, escorted American merchant ships, and briefly blockaded Tripoli harbor. In the only real action that year, the schooner *Enterprise* engaged and soundly defeated the Tripolitan ship *Tripoli* off the coast of Malta on August 1.[22](#)

In his annual address to Congress at the end of the year Jefferson reported on the demands of the pasha, concluded that "the style of the demand admitted but one answer," and described the action taken to date. That action had been taken without any consultation with Congress, but the president now asked for formal and expanded power to deal with Barbary. Two months later Congress passed an act authorizing him to instruct naval commanders to seize Tripolitan goods and vessels, and to commission privateers to aid in the effort.[23](#)

During the following three years the pasha maintained his demands and the United States, rotating ships and crews, maintained its naval presence in the Mediterranean as well as diplomatic efforts to make peace. In 1802 Jefferson was reportedly of the view "that the time is come when negotiations [sic] may advantageously take place." He was to be disappointed.[24](#) Tripolitan corsairs evaded the blockade and American merchantmen were captured. Most escaped their captors; only one was carried into port, the *Franklin*, in 1802, and the five Americans on it were quickly ransomed. In Algiers, Richard O'Brien sarcastically remarked without comment: "It is asserted that there are at sea, at present, six sail of Tripoline corsairs & it is asserted that the frigates of the United States & those of Sweden are blockading Tripoli."[25](#) Nor did the blockade stop Tripoli's trade with other Barbary powers. It did, however, interfere with it, and the other rulers sided with the pasha. The possibility of Tunis and/or Morocco entering the war became a serious concern off and on throughout 1802.

By then Jefferson was reconsidering his position. He had inherited a national debt that he was determined to eliminate, but the challenge posed by Tripoli could not be ignored. The old question was still debated: which would be less costly, tribute or war? The president had argued in favor of the

latter, but as 1802 advanced war was proving to be more difficult and more costly than anticipated — it would be even more so if other Barbary powers became involved. “They know they cannot meet us with force any more than they could France, Spain or England,” he wrote from Monticello at the end of March. “Their system is a war of little expense to them, which must put the great nations to a greater expense than the presents which would buy it off.”[26](#) He was still as much against buying peace and paying tribute as he had been since first dealing with Barbary in 1784; it was a matter of principle. But one had to be practical as well as principled.[27](#)

Back in Washington ten days later, Jefferson asked his cabinet whether we should buy peace with Tripoli. All agreed that should be an option. The next day, Secretary Madison wrote Cathcart: “...it is thought best that you should not be tied down to a refusal of presents whether to be included in the peace, or to be made from time to time during its continuance, especially as in the latter case the title to the presents will be a motive to its continuance.” He was given explicit dollar limits and reminded that any engagements should be kept smaller if possible.[28](#)

There had also been a complete change in negotiators. Cathcart was no longer welcome in Tripoli, Tunis or Algiers; Consul William Eaton had left Tunis on orders from the bey and returned to America; and Tobias Lear had arrived as Consul General in Algiers in November 1803 to replace Richard O’Brien, who had long sought to leave the post. Lear was also to take over negotiations with the pasha in Tripoli with instructions based on Cathcart’s revised guidance, allowing present on treaty signature, periodic tribute and ransom for captives if necessary.[29](#)

A new commodore for the Mediterranean squadron was also named in 1803, Captain Edward Preble. He had barely arrived when he was told that Morocco was at war with America and Moroccan corsairs were looking for American merchantmen. Commodore Preble spent his first month in the region dealing with Morocco. Early in October, with four US Navy warships in Tangier harbor the troublesome issues were resolved peaceably by Commodore Preble and Consul James Simpson.[30](#)

The most important naval action in 1803 involved the frigate *Philadelphia*, which ran aground near Tripoli in October. The pasha imprisoned the 307-man crew and refloated and repaired the stricken vessel. Before they could make any use of her, though, on February 16, 1804 a U.S. navy team under Lt. Stephen Decatur slipped into Tripoli harbor after dark and set fires on board that totally destroyed the *Philadelphia*. The loss of the frigate weakened the American squadron, while captives from the *Philadelphia* gave the pasha new leverage and prospects of substantial ransom.[31](#)

When news of the *Philadelphia*’s loss reached America, Jefferson and his colleagues began looking for a way to send at least two more frigates to the Mediterranean. Congress rallied behind the President and the navy, approving a new tax and new expenditures for the war.[32](#) After initial political and public criticism of the president due to the devastating loss, widespread public support was stimulated by Stephen Decatur’s successful stealth mission under Tripoli’s guns.[33](#)

Jefferson’s thinking about how to deal with the Barbary challenge had evolved with experience. Already in 1803, planning to add smaller vessels to the squadron and just before approving presents for peace and annual tribute, he had written his Secretary of the Navy “I have never believed in any effect from a show of force to those powers...but [if one works within their system of presents and

tribute] the warring on them at times will keep the demand of presents within bounds. The important thing for us now is to dispatch our small vessels.”³⁴ A year later, in 1804, he decided the current squadron was not big enough to do the job. Newly-appointed Commodore Samuel Barron would command eleven vessels, “a force which would be able, beyond the possibility of a doubt, to coerce the enemy to a peace on terms compatible with our honor and our interest.”³⁵ The expanded squadron would be more than twice the size of the original one three years earlier and its mix of frigates, brigs and smaller vessels would be better suited to its mission.

With his expanded fleet, Commodore Barron was to maintain “an effectual blockade of Tripoli” and “you will by all other means in your power annoy the enemy so as to force him to a peace honorable to the United States.” Negotiations to that end were left in the hands of Tobias Lear, Consul General in Algiers, with whom Barron would “cordially cooperate... in all such measures as may be deemed the best calculated to effectuate a termination of The war with Tripoli and to ensure a continuance of the friendship and respect of the other Barbary Powers.”³⁶

After arriving on the scene, if Barron judged it expedient he was authorized to support an overland attack on Tripoli by forces supporting the restoration to power of Hamet Qaramanli, an older brother ousted in a 1796 coup by Pasha Yusuf Qaramanli. That idea had been proposed in 1801 by James Cathcart and also by William Eaton who knew the exiled Hamet in Tunis when he was American consul there. The proposal had received qualified approval from Secretary of State Madison in 1802.³⁷

Commodore Barron arrived in the Mediterranean in the fall of 1804 with Eaton, now American Naval Agent for Barbary³⁸ and anxious to implement his scheme to lead ex-pasha Hamet overland to attack Tripoli. With or without a change of pasha, however, peace was Jefferson’s objective. A few days after Secretary Madison had given hesitant support to Eaton’s plan back in 1802, Secretary of the Navy Robert Smith wrote Commodore Morris, who was then commanding the squadron in the Mediterranean: “In adjusting the terms of Peace with the Dey of Tripoli, whatever regard may be had to the situation of his Brother, it is not to be considered by you of sufficient magnitude to prevent or even to retard a final settlement with the Dey. Mr Eton (sic) in this affair cannot be considered an authorized agent of the Government.”³⁹

Barron had doubts about involving Hamet, but Eaton and Captain Preble persuaded him. November 16 Eaton sailed on the brig *Argus* to find Hamet in Egypt. Barron may have expected Eaton to bring Hamet to Syracuse for a consultation⁴⁰—that is unclear—but having eventually located him, Eaton helped the ex-pasha put together a collection of a few hundred armed Arabs and Greeks, mostly mercenaries under a handful of disparate leaders. Eaton, Hamet and several marines marched their “army” nearly 500 miles through the desert along the southern shore of the Mediterranean and, on April 27, 1805, they captured the town of Derne, some miles east of Benghazi. The *Argus* and two sister ships supplied them with provisions along their march and actively supported them in the taking of Derne (where Hamet had been governor three years before under his brother Yusuf). In the meantime, the American blockade of Tripoli had been maintained through the winter and spring.

Commodore Barron was seriously ill in Syracuse (Sicily), whence he continued to oversee fleet affairs. Concerned that Eaton may be over-committing himself, he had written in March to point out that the

United States was working with Hamet only to achieve its own ends and was in no way committed to putting him back in power.⁴¹ Then, May 18, he wrote Tobias Lear that, from what he had learned of Hamet Qaramanli, he could no longer support the plan involving the ex-pasha. He noted that the condition of some of his vessels and periods of enlistment of his personnel precluded another winter of blockade, was concerned about the fate of the American prisoners held by the pasha, and thought it time to respond to encouraging hints from Tripoli favoring negotiation. Not mentioned, but no doubt also on his mind, his health would not permit him to lead an attack on Tripoli that summer.⁴² Indeed, he handed command of the squadron to Captain John Rodgers less than a week later.

Lear sailed from Syracuse for Tripoli May 24th. Negotiations began shortly after his arrival, preliminary articles were agreed June 3 and the American captives from the *Philadelphia* were embarked on US vessels June 4. The final document was signed on the tenth. It involved neither payment for peace nor annual tribute. Based on the difference between the numbers of captives held on the two sides, ransom of \$60,000 was agreed, well below the limit given Lear. Far to the east, the Americans, Hamet and his close associates left Derne on board American naval vessels June 12. The Senate ratified the treaty April 12, 1806.⁴³

The conclusion of the war in 1805 set off a wave of national pride among Americans, inspiring artwork and patriotic songs. But the circumstances under which peace was achieved gave President Jefferson's political opponents ammunition to criticize his decisions. The Federalists championed the cause of William Eaton, who complained that the United States's Navy had abandoned Hamet Qaramanli and Eaton's plan to reinstall him as Pasha. Eaton felt that if his plan had been carried through, the United States would have won a more glorious victory.⁴⁴ Jefferson formally addressed questions about his treatment of Hamet in a letter to the Senate. There, he reiterated and amplified the reasoning of Madison's 1802 letters to Eaton and Cathcart: "We considered that concerted operations by those who have a common enemy were entirely justifiable, and might produce effects favorable to both without binding either to guarantee the objects of the other," explaining that "cooperation only was intended and by no means an union of our object with the fortune of the ex-pasha." Jefferson explained that the U.S. government had never planned a full-scale land attack to place Hamet back in power, noting that Hamet himself had acknowledged that he was to carry out the land operations, while the U.S. undertook those by sea. The experience reaching and taking Derne made it clear that Hamet had little local backing and access to few resources. When, at the same time, an opportunity for peace presented itself, Tobias Lear seized it.⁴⁵

Jefferson exonerated himself from playing any part in building up the expectations of Hamet, and he defended any unauthorized verbal commitments Eaton may have made, stating that, "In operations at such a distance, it becomes necessary to leave much to the discretion of the agents employed, but events may still turn up beyond the limits of that discretion. Unable in such a case to consult his government, a zealous citizen will act as he believes that would direct him, were it apprised of the circumstances, and will take on himself the responsibility. In all these cases the purity and patriotism of the motives should shield the agent from blame, and even secure a sanction where the error is not too injurious."

The U.S. government did attempt to provide some concessions for Hamet Qaramanli in terms of the treaty. Tobias Lear convinced the Pasha to accept a clause that would require him to restore Hamet 's wife and family. Roughly a year after the U.S. Senate had ratified the treaty, it was learned that Lear had added a secret clause that allowed the Pasha to wait four years to return the family. That fact might well have prevented ratification of the treaty had the legislature been aware of it. Although the Barbary victory had been tainted by questionable actions on the part of Lear and Eaton, both had technically gone beyond the bounds of their instructions, and so the reputation of President Jefferson and his administration suffered minimal damage.[46](#)

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