
THE UNITED STATES AND THE SPECTER OF ISLAM: THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY

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The American conflicts with Algiers (1785-1795, 1807, 1815) and with Tripoli (1801-1805) were prompted by an economic desire to open the Mediterranean to American trade. But these conflicts also reflected a profound ideological and cultural conflict between the United States and Islamic societies. Americans regarded Algiers and Tripoli as models of despotism and decadence, and by defeating them hoped to prove that the people of the United States would not succumb to the same political and cultural evils Americans believed had subdued the people of the Barbary states.

Three mysterious strangers, two men and a woman, landed in Norfolk, Virginia late in 1785. Though they arrived on a ship from England, they spoke no English. Governor Patrick Henry ordered them jailed, and sent Dr. William Foushee to interrogate them. Foushee could communicate with the three in French, which was neither his nor their first language. He could not read the documents they carried, written in Hebrew, so he could not attest to their meaning. Though he could read the documents they carried written in English, which suggested that the three had come from Morocco, they could not read them and so could not attest to what they said. Foushee reported this mutual bafflement to Governor Henry, who concluded that the three were spies sent to Virginia by the Dey of Algiers, and he ordered them put on the next ship back to Europe.

Why would three strangers from Algiers, if that is indeed where they were from, so alarm Patrick Henry and the Virginians? Algiers had declared war on the U.S. in July, and by the end of the summer had captured two American merchant ships, holding their crews hostage. Threat of capture sent insurance rates up for American vessels, and kept other American merchants out of the Mediterranean. British newspapers even reported that Algiers had captured the ship bringing home American diplomat Benjamin Franklin from Paris. Franklin, the papers said, was bearing up well in Algerian captivity.

Algiers, and other Muslim states, presented a certain kind of threat to the emerging American political order. Henry and other American leaders had learned about Islam and Muslim societies from the most influential

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political writers of the century, Thomas Trenchard and Robert Gordon, and Charles Secondat, Baron Montesquieu, and Voltaire. Trenchard and Gordon's *Cato's Letters* formed the political canon for the founding generation of American political leaders, warned Englishmen of the 1720s that if they were not cautious of their liberty and jealous of the King's power, England could degenerate into political tyranny almost without comparison. To dramatize tyranny's evils, Trenchard and Gordon pointed to Moroccan emperor, Mulay Isma'il (1672-1727). His gullible subjects believed him to be descended from the prophet, and considered themselves blessed to have their heads lopped off by his divine hand. Forty thousand blessed Moroccans, according to Trenchard and Gordon, had been dispatched by the emperor. In Turkey, the Sultan was considered to be the "vice-regent of God" and the only law was his "Lust, his Maggots, or his Rage." His status as protector of the faith gave him unlimited power. "Turkish Slavery is confirmed, and Turkish Tyranny defended by Religion!" Montesquieu, the French political theorist, used Turkey as a model of despotic government in *Spirit of the Laws*, and Voltaire's 1742 play, *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophete*, translated into English as *Mahomet, the Imposter* shows the founder of Islam as a power-mad fanatic able to seduce others into his dreams of grandeur.¹

Blind belief in a ruler or a leader, and an acceptance of the status quo as God's will, bred a kind of intellectual lethargy. French philosophe Abbe Constantin Francois de Chassebouef Volney traveled through Egypt and Syria in the 1780s. He noted that these places, which once had been flourishing centers of trade and learning, had become cultural, commercial, and intellectual backwaters. How had this happened? In the book he wrote after returning to Paris Volney speculated that the Ottoman empire's despotism caused the decay, and it would "ruin the labours of past ages, and destroy the hopes of future times, because the barbarity of ignorant despotism never considers tomorrow."² Behind this ignorant despotism Volney saw religion's pernicious hand, a point he elaborated in his next book, *The Ruins, or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*. In *The Ruins* Volney advanced the idea suggested in the first book, that religious intolerance had stifled free inquiry and prevented men from rising above misery by making them accept their misery as God's will. Volney wrote this book to warn the people of France of the dangers of religious intolerance. Volney and his books received a warm welcome from Americans. William Eaton, whom John Adams would send to be American consul in Tunis, read Volney's account of Syria and Egypt to prepare himself for his mission, and reported to the Secretary of State that he need not say anything about the character of Tunisia's ruler because anyone who read Volney, as the Secretary had, would know all about these kinds of rulers. Thomas Jefferson was so struck by *The Ruins*, which had been translated into English in 1792 and had gone through two American editions by 1799, that he undertook a new translation in 1802, while he was President of the United States³

The moral lesson of Algiers was clear. Religious intolerance and despotic governments were bad things. In building their government, Americans should avoid the paths of despotism. But what to do about the declaration of war by Algiers? John Adams, American minister to England, though the U.S. should do what all the nations of Europe did, and pay off Algiers to secure peaceful trade in the Mediterranean. Adams met with Tripoli's ambassador in London, smoking a pipe and talking about the possibilities of opening trade. Abdurrahman thought that for a certain sum the U.S. could secure treaties with all the North African countries, and would also help negotiate with the Ottoman sultan. Adams called Jefferson, American minister to France, to come to London to talk to Abdurrahman.

Jefferson reacted differently. If the U.S. began to practice the same kind of diplomacy as European nations did, it would be the first step toward degenerating into the same kind of corrupt society as England and France suffered under. Instead, Jefferson proposed securing peace through the medium of war. The U.S. could either build a navy, or it could cooperate with other countries, such as Portugal—whose ships already patrolled the straits of Gibraltar to keep Algerian ships out of the Atlantic—Sweden, Naples, Sardinia, and Russia. He proposed a multinational military force, led by American naval hero John Paul Jones, to act against Algiers. It was a bold idea. But the French government refused to allow this plan to be discussed on French soil. A popular maxim reportedly coined by British, Dutch, and French merchants, that “If there were no Algiers, we would have to build one,” shows the value that Algerian attacks on rival shipping had for the large powers.

Jefferson went home to the U.S., which had adopted a new government which had the power to tax American citizens and to raise a military force. Among his first acts was to draft a report on Mediterranean trade, showing the value of commerce in that sea which now was closed off the by the Algerian threats. Jefferson presented Congress with three options: to give up the Mediterranean, to pay tribute to Algiers and other powers, or to build a military force to secure Mediterranean peace and trade. The U.S. did nothing.

The two dozen sailors languished in Algiers until 1793, when they were joined by a hundred more men captured from a dozen more ships. England had arranged a truce between Portugal and Algiers, actually a fraudulent truce, which permitted Algerian cruisers to enter the Atlantic before Lisbon learned of the fraud. Jefferson had by now left the administration, but Washington and Congress acted quickly. The U.S. would build six frigates to protect American trade, and would also send negotiators to Algiers. Jefferson had already tried to send John Paul Jones to negotiate the release of the American captives (Jones dies before receiving his commission). The frigates were still in the planning stage in 1795, when the U.S. and Algiers signed a treaty. In return for releasing the hostages and not taking any more, Algiers would receive \$800,000 and an annual shipment of naval supplies, along with a new American-built frigate, the *Crescent*, and

some smaller vessels. The U.S. made similar treaties with Tunis and Tripoli. This was not a satisfactory solution to Jefferson, and the Republicans asked how the Federalists could keep a straight face while trumpeting their slogan, “Millions for defense, not one cent for tribute.”

The treaty settlement also did not please Pacha Yusuf Qaramanli of Tripoli. He received less than Algiers, the Americans had listened to Algerian claims that Tripoli was under Algerian hegemony, and the Americans were slow to send what they had promised. Yusuf’s cruisers captured an American ship in 1800, and though ship and crew were released, Yusuf hoped to secure recognition of Tripolitan sovereignty from the U.S., as well as more tribute promptly paid. His message reached Washington, the new capital city, just as Thomas Jefferson was becoming President. Yusuf’s tone and demands, Jefferson said, would admit of but one answer. He sent the American fleet, which consisted of one frigate and a few smaller ships, to the Mediterranean. They were to co-operate with other powers at war with Yusuf, if indeed he wanted war with the Americans (Sweden and Tripoli were at war, and Portugal, Naples, and even Morocco might be allies in this).

In August 1801 the American ship *Enterprise* encountered a Tripolitan ship in the Mediterranean. The two ships fought, and in an engagement of several hours the American triumphed. The American now would only pay tribute out of the mouth of a cannon. In his first annual message Jefferson pointed to this as the first example of American naval heroism. Though the U.S. entered the war reluctantly, it was not through cowardice, he said, but because we preferred to devote our energies to the multiplication of the human race, rather than to its destruction.

Hardly had the smoke cleared from this battle than it was acted out on the New York stage. In *The Tripolitan Prize, or an American Tar on an English Shore*, performed in the fall of 1802, an American ship fights and subdues a Tripolitan ship. To make the drama even more compelling, the now forgotten author had the two ships fight off the coast of England. The American now could watch not only the American victory over Tripoli, but could see England’s reaction to the American victory. The Americans were not only teaching Tripoli a lesson, but were teaching England, which had for so long paid tribute to Tripoli, the best way to deal with Tripoli.

Another anonymous author in 1802 was even bolder. In a book with the remarkable title of *The Life of Mahomet, or the History of that Imposture which was begun, carried on, and finally established by him in Arabia and which has subjugated a larger portion of the Globe, than the Religion of Jesus has yet set at liberty. To which is added, an account of Egypt*, the Christian nations are called upon to invade Muslim nations to liberate the “sentiments of men” from Muslim fetters, and to allow the Muslim people to achieve a “mental revolution” aided by the “formidable attacks” of Christian “reason and judgement”.⁴ Though the Americans did not entirely take up this challenge, the blockade and bombardment of Tripoli were hailed by Americans and by some Europeans as an example for all. Pope

Pius VII declared that the Americans, with a small force, and in a matter of a few months, had done more against the Muslim infidels than all of the Christian Europe had for centuries.

Though the war would go on for four more years, the Americans already declared victory. Before the war was over, the Tripolitans would capture the largest ship in the American fleet, *The Philadelphia*, taking some 300 American sailors prisoner. Stephen Decatur destroyed the ship to prevent Tripoli from refitting it, sneaking in and out of Tripoli's harbor without losing a man, in what Lord Nelson called the age's boldest act of naval heroism, and became the greatest American naval hero of the day. The blockade and bombardment of Tripoli had some effect: the Pacha agreed to release the American captives, when the U.S. paid him \$60,000. The U.S. navy and marines dispute who was responsible for ending the war: the naval blockade did threaten Tripoli's economy, but the evidence that Ahmet Qaramanli could have overthrown his brother, even with American help, is not convincing. The U.S. agreed to pay \$60,000 to release the American prisoners, and the war ended.

As far as victories go, it was not a clear one. The war with Tripoli did not solve, for Americans, the problems of Mediterranean trade. But it did resolve for Americans what their proper role in the world would be. They had created a government which would help them avoid the calamities of despotism, and at the same time opened up to them an inland empire, which diverted their attention away from the contentious Mediterranean. The specter of Islam had warned Americans against religious and political intolerance.

The war with Tripoli vindicated the American character. Joseph Hanson, who is not known to have written another line in his life, wrote an epic poem about the Tripolitan war, which presented the American sailors inspired by "justice and freedom" showing the "plundering vassals of the tyrannical Bashaw" that on "this side of the Atlantic, dwells a race of beings of equal spirit on the first of nations!"⁵

More proof of this could be found in the popular print, "Blowing up of the Fire Ship *Intrepid*." The *Intrepid* had been turned into a floating bomb, and with ten men commanded by Captain Somers and Lieutenants Israel and Henry Wadsworth it stole into Tripoli harbor. The plan was to detonate the ship beneath the walls of the castle, but they were discovered, and either intentionally or accidentally set off the bomb. All the Americans died, as a contemporary engraving says, preferring "Death and the Destruction of the Enemy, to Captivity & a torturing Slavery." (Three years later Wadsworth's sister, Zilpah, married to Stephen Longfellow, would name her first son Henry Wadsworth in his honor. Young H.W. Longfellow became an ardent and gentle pacifist, but also an inspiring nationalist).

A popular novel, *the Captivity and Suffering of Mrs. Maria Martin*, told the fictional story of a woman taken captive in Algiers, who endures solitary confinement for refusing the advances of a lustful Turk. She nearly goes mad, in a scene paralleling the moment of salvation in a conversion narrative, then is released. Published more than a dozen times between 1807 and 1818, Martin's story presents her self-reliance and ability to preserve her virtue as a moral example. The fact that her story takes place in Algiers, not in Tripoli, underscores the way Americans conflated these various places, a point brought home by another contemporary illustration, Stephen Decatur's "Conflict with the Algerine at Tripoli."

As with the blowing up of the *Intrepid*, this painting is based on a true incident. Decatur, who had been promoted to Captain after his destruction of the Philadelphia, had commanded a ship during the battle of Tripoli harbor, 3 August 1804. His brother James had commanded another ship, which forced a Tripolitan vessel to surrender. Or so James Decatur thought. The Tripolitan captain struck his colors, but when the Americans boarded he and his crew attacked them and killed James Decatur. At the end of the day, as Stephen Decatur and the other victorious Americans left Tripoli harbor, he learned of the treachery which had killed his brother. He ordered his ship back into Tripoli, sought out his brother's killer, boarded the ship, and engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the Tripolitan captain. As Decatur and the Tripolitan were struggling, another Tripolitan sailor tried to kill Decatur from behind. The captain was saved by the interposition of Daniel Fraser, who took the blow aimed at Decatur's head. This action doubled the heroic character of Decatur, and also made a hero of the American sailor, though subsequently a sailor named Reuben James would also take credit for the act. Reuben James, or Daniel Fraser, represents the every American who has a part to play in this struggle against tyranny. A contemporary American songwriter promised that if any despot dared insult the American flag, "We'll send them Decatur to teach the 'Good Manners.'"⁶

Two decades after he had interrogated the three mysterious strangers in Richmond, Dr. William Foushee presided at a Richmond banquet in honor of Decatur and other heroes of Tripoli. This was just one of many celebrations held throughout the young nation as victorious men returned. In 1805, when the American sailors returned victorious from Tripoli, they were welcomed with plays and public receptions, with painting linking their bombardment of Tripoli to the Battle of Bunker Hill. Maryland lawyer Francis Scott Key was just one of many to celebrate the returning heroes in song. Set to a popular English drinking song, "Anacreon in Heaven," Key's song calls on Americans to behold this band of brothers who have secured their fame and rights, overcoming the perils of sea and desert, and the conflict resistless. Their foes "shrunk dismay'd from the war's desolation," and even the Crescent was obscured by the new "star-spangled flag of our nation." The flaming stars in the American flag became meteors of war, and forced the "turbaned head" to bow down as the blue

waves turned red with “infidel blood.” The encounter with Tripoli had revealed, Key and other hoped, something of American character and resolve. Though Key’s song, written in 1805, is now forgotten, its melody lingers on.

The following elegant and appropriate song was sung at Georgetown, at an entertainment given by the citizens to captains Stephen Decatur and Charles Stewart. It would not discredit the pen of a Payne.

Tune—Anacreon

When the warrior returns from the battle afar
To the home and the country he was nobly defended,
Oh! Warm by the welcome to gladden his ear,
And loud be the Joys that his perils are ended!
 In the full tide of song, let his fame roll along,
 To the feast-flowing board let us gratefully throng.
Where mixt with the olive the laurel shall wave
And form a bright wreath for the brow of the brave.

Columbians a band of thy brothers behold!
Who claim their reward in they heart’s warm emotion:
When thy cause, when thy honour urg’d onward the bold,
In vain frown’d the desert—in vain rag’d the ocean.
 To a far distant shore—to the battle’s wild roar
 They rush’d they fair fame and thy right to secure.
Then mixt with the olive the laurel shall wave,
And form a bright wreath for the brow of the brave.

In conflict resistless each toil they endure’d
Till their foes shrunk dismay’d from the war’s desolation:
And pale beam’d the Crescent, its splendor obscured
By the light of the star-spangled flag of our nation.
 Where each flaming star gleam’d a meteor of war,
 And the turban’d heads bowed to the terrible glare.
Then mixt with the olive the laurel shall wave,
And form a bright wreath for the brow of the brave.

Our fathers who stand on the summit of fame,
Shall exultingly hear, of their sons, the proud story,
How their young bosoms glow’d with the patriot flame,
How they fought, how they fell, in the midst of their glory.
 How triumphant they rode, o’er the wandering flood,
 And stain’d the blue waters with infidel blood;
How mixt with the olive the laurel did wave,
And form a bright wreath for the brow of the brave.

Then welcome the warrior return’d from afar,
To the home and the country he so nobly defended.
Let the thanks due to valor now gladden his ear,
And loud be the joy that his perils are ended.

In the full tide of song, let his fame roll along.
To the feast-flowing board let us gratefully throng.
Where mixt with the live the laurel shall wave
And form a bright wreath for the brow of the brave.

[Francis Scott Key]
New York *Evening Post*, January 9, 1806.
Boston *Independent Chronicle*, December 30, 1805

NOTES

¹ John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, *Cato's Letters* (4 vol., London, 1723) 2: 194-195, 47-48; 1: 192-193; Charles Secondat, Baron de Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, tr. Thomas Nugent (New York: Hafner Publishing Co., 1949) I, Francois Marie Aroust de Voltaire, *Le Fanatisme ou Mahomet le Prophete* (Paris, 1742) translated by James Miller as *Mahomet, the Imposter* (London, 1744). All of this elaborated more in Robert Allison, *Crescent Obscured: The U.S. and the Muslim World, 1776-1815* (New York, 1995).

² Volney, *Travels through Egypt and Syria in the Years 1783, 1784, & 1785* (2 vols., New York, 1798) 1:7.

³ Volney, *The Ruins, or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires* (London, 1792); Barlow and Jefferson translation, Paris, 1802); William Eaton Letterbook, 13 February 1799, 28-29, Eaton Papers, Henry E. Huntington Library.

⁴ *The Life of Mahomet, or the History of that Imposture which was begun, carried on, and finally established by him in Arabia; and which has subjugated a larger portion of the Globe, than the Religion of Jesus has yet set at liberty. To which is added, an account of Egypt.* (Worcester, Massachusetts: Isaiah Thomas, 1802) 85, 83-84.

⁵ Joseph Hanson, *The Musselmen Humbled, or, a Heroic Poem in Celebration of the Bravery Displayed by the American Tars, in the Contest with Tripoli* (New York: Printed for the Author by Southwick and Hardcastle, 1806) 4-5.

⁶ New York *Evening Post*, 15 Mar 1806