

## The United States and the Barbary Pirates

**The American Revolution was barely over before the United States faced its first foreign policy test. What should the United States do about North African pirate states that plundered American shipping?**

On September 11, 2001, terrorists struck the United States, killing about 4,000 people. The U.S. president responded by declaring a war on terrorism. He got Congress to authorize using force against any nation, organization, or person involved in the attack or against any nation harboring the terrorist organizations.

When the United States began, it faced another foreign policy test: How should it respond to the Barbary pirates who were plundering its ships?

In the 1700s, the countries along the southern coastline of the Mediterranean Sea were called the Barbary States. They included Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. Named after the Berbers, one of North Africa's native peoples, the Barbary States were little pirate kingdoms that plundered the merchant ships of many nations.

The Barbary pirates were mostly [Berbers](#), [Arabs](#), and other [Muslims](#), but some came from Christian Europe. The pirates used small, fast-moving vessels to capture trading ships and their cargoes. They held the crews and passengers for ransom or sold them as slaves.

Each of the four Barbary States had its own ruler. He was usually a military strongman who had grabbed the throne by assassinating the ruler or murdering rival family members.

In 1662, England made the first treaty with a Barbary ruler. This set the pattern for similar treaties by other European nations trading in the Mediterranean. Typically, a Barbary peace treaty required a nation to pay "[tribute](#)" to the pirate ruler, who would then call off attacks on the nation's ships. Tribute usually took the form of a large payment of money plus annual payments. The annual payments might be cash, military supplies, or expensive presents for the ruler. A particular treaty might also include ransom money for the release of a nation's citizens held captive by the Barbary country.

The Barbary rulers frequently demanded that nations "renew" their treaties for even greater amounts of tribute. Until a nation agreed to new terms, its ships remained fair game for the pirates.

The war fleets of the European powers could easily have defeated the Barbary pirate ships. Yet the Europeans agreed to the tribute treaties. Nations like England believed that by paying tribute they not only bought protection for themselves but also redirected the pirates to wreak havoc on the merchant ships of competing nations.

The American colonies traded extensively in the Mediterranean before the [Revolutionary War](#). During this time, British tribute treaties with the Barbary States protected American ships. But after the colonies broke away from England, this protection vanished. Many British believed that the Barbary pirates would eliminate American commercial competition in the Mediterranean. One British official gloated, "The Americans cannot protect themselves. They cannot pretend to [have] a navy."

### **The U.S. Pays Tribute**

After finding American commerce in the Mediterranean had almost stopped due to the pirates, the Continental Congress agreed in 1784 to negotiate treaties with the four Barbary States. Congress appointed a special commission, consisting of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin, to oversee the negotiations. The following year, Congress authorized a maximum of \$80,000 to spend on tribute treaties with all the Barbary States.

In 1787, the United States signed a [tribute treaty](#) with Morocco. This proved to be a reasonable treaty, costing the United States a one-time only tribute of about \$20,000. Except for a few brief disagreements, Morocco never again harassed American shipping.

Algiers, the most powerful of the Barbary States, was a different story. In the summer of 1785, pirates from Algiers captured two American merchant ships and held the 21 men aboard them for ransom. The United States offered \$4,200 for the captives. The ruler of Algiers, called the dey, demanded nearly \$60,000. The Americans refused, and negotiations dragged on for more than 10 years.

The two commissioners most involved in tribute treaty negotiations were John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. Adams favored paying tribute as the cheapest way to get American commerce moving again in the Mediterranean. Jefferson disagreed. He saw no end to the demands for tribute. He wanted matters settled "through the medium of war" and proposed a league of trading nations to force the end of Barbary piracy.

In [1790](#), pirates from Algiers captured 11 American ships and more than 100 prisoners to add to those already held for ransom. This shocking news produced a serious debate in the newly formed U.S. Congress over the need to build a navy. But it took five years before Congress authorized the construction of six warships.

Finally, in 1796, the United States signed a peace [treaty](#) with Algiers. The United States agreed to pay \$642,500 plus annual tribute of naval supplies and presents to the dey. In exchange, the dey promised to release of the American captives and protect American shipping. The United States had to borrow money to make the primary tribute payment.

### **Trouble with Tripoli and Tunis**

Over the next two years, the United States negotiated similar tribute treaties with [Tripoli](#) and [Tunis](#). The treaties with these countries cost a total of \$160,000 plus supplies and

presents to the Barbary rulers. [William Eaton](#), a former U.S. Army officer who became the American consul (diplomatic representative) at Tunis, disliked the Barbary tribute system. He wrote that "there is no access to the permanent friendship of these states without paving the way with gold or cannonballs; and the proper question is which method is preferable."

Before long, the rulers of Tripoli and Tunis complained about delays in the delivery of the annual tribute supplies. The ruler of Tripoli, the pasha, demanded a new treaty with a much larger tribute. Meanwhile, the U.S. ambassador to England scrambled to gather expensive presents owed to the pasha of Tunis. One of the gifts was a pair of pistols mounted with gold and set with diamonds.

In May 1801, the pasha of Tripoli canceled his treaty with the United States and declared [war on American shipping](#). Even before he knew that Tripoli had declared war, newly inaugurated President Jefferson ordered a naval squadron of four warships to the Mediterranean. But this squadron did not accomplish much. Nor did a second one sent the following year. U.S. Navy ships did blockade Tripoli harbor, but only for a short time.

Frustrated by the timidity and even incompetence of the U.S. Navy squadron commanders, William Eaton started to work on a plot to overthrow Yusuf Karamanli, the pasha of Tripoli. To seize the throne for himself, Yusuf had murdered his older brother and forced another one, Hamet, into exile. Eaton contacted Hamet and promised him U.S. support in overthrowing his brother. Eaton believed that once on the throne of Tripoli, Hamet would repay the United States with permanent peaceful relations.

### [War with Tripoli](#)

A new naval squadron under [Commodore Edward Preble](#) arrived in the Mediterranean in 1803. Preble aggressively restored the blockade of Tripoli harbor. But one of Preble's warships, the *Philadelphia*, ran aground while chasing a Tripolitan vessel. The Tripoli pirates captured more than 300 U.S. Navy officers and crew and imprisoned them. Pasha Yusuf now demanded \$3 million for peace and the ransom of the American captives.

Commodore Preble realized that he could not leave the *Philadelphia* (a frigate with 36 cannons) in the hands of the Tripoli pirates. Fearful that retaking the ship under Tripoli's harbor guns would be too risky, Preble decided to destroy the frigate instead. Lieutenant Stephen Decatur and about 70 officers, sailors, and marines volunteered for what became [one of the most heroic actions](#) in the history of the U.S. Navy.

On the night of February 16, 1804, the 25-year-old Decatur and his men boldly sailed a captured pirate vessel next to the *Philadelphia* in Tripoli harbor. The Americans quickly boarded the ship, overwhelmed the Tripoli pirates guarding it, and set the frigate on fire. Decatur and all his men then escaped aboard their vessel without any casualties. As they sailed out of the harbor, the *Philadelphia* exploded.

A few months later, Commodore Preble assembled all his warships at Tripoli and [bombaraded](#) the town and its harbor fortifications. In the meantime, Jefferson ordered a new U.S. Navy squadron to go to the Barbary Coast.

Late in 1804, William Eaton started on his plan to overthrow Pasha Yusuf of Tripoli. Eaton found Yusuf's brother, Hamet, in Egypt. Eaton then recruited with his own and borrowed money an incredible "army" of Arab horsemen, soldiers of fortune, and cutthroats. Eaton, along with Hamet and a handful of American marines, led this band 500 miles across North Africa to Derna, a port town controlled by Pasha Yusuf. With the aid of three U.S. warships, Eaton and his men stormed the town on April 27, 1805, and drove out its defenders. (In honor of this victory, the words: "To the Shores of Tripoli" were put on the Marine Corps' flag and later put in the [Marines' Hymn](#).)

Troops sent by Yusuf arrived to besiege Derna. Much to Eaton's dismay, he received word that Pasha Yusuf had signed a [peace treaty](#) with the United States in Tripoli. This ended Eaton's plan to replace Yusuf with his brother.

The treaty of peace with Pasha Yusuf, under the guns of U.S. warships at Tripoli and Eaton's forces at Derna, disappointed many Americans. Yusuf released the prisoners from the *Philadelphia* and several American merchant ships. The United States still agreed, however, to pay \$60,000 for them.

### **War with Algiers**

Following the war with Tripoli, the United States ordered its Navy ships in the Mediterranean to return home. Conflict with England was heating up and finally exploded in the [War of 1812](#).

By this time, a new dey, Omar, had taken over in Algiers. He ordered the capture of American merchant ships because of overdue U.S. tribute. President Madison responded by getting Congress to authorize military action against Algiers in February 1815. He sent a squadron of nine warships to end Barbary tribute. [Commodore Stephen Decatur](#) (the leader of the group that set fire of the *Philadelphia* 11 years earlier) commanded the squadron.

After capturing several of the dey's pirate ships, Decatur coolly sailed into Algiers harbor on June 29, 1815. The next day, under the threat of Decatur's warships, Dey Omar agreed to a [peace treaty](#) and the release of all American prisons without any ransom payment. In addition, Article II of the treaty stated, "No tribute, either as biennial presents or under any other form shall ever be required by Algiers from the United States on any pretext." Then in an unprecedented act, the Americans demanded that Dey Omar pay the United States \$10,000 as compensation for property taken from its citizens. Decatur sailed on to Tunis and Tripoli, where he won similar concessions.

About a year later, Dey Omar wrote to President Madison, proposing a renewal of the tribute treaty the United States had signed with Algiers in 1796. Madison wrote back that

"the United States, whilst they wish for war with no nation, will buy peace with none." He concluded that it was the "settled policy" of the United States "that as peace is better than war, war is better than tribute."

### **For Discussion and Writing**

1. Why did the European powers go along with paying tribute to the Barbary States?
2. What effect did the Barbary wars have on U.S. military defense?
3. Do you agree or disagree with President Madison that "war is better than tribute"? Why?
4. What are some similarities and differences between the conflict with the Barbary States and America's current campaign against terrorism?

### **For Further Information**

[The Barbary Wars](#) From Mariner's Museum.

[America and the Barbary Pirates: An International Battle Against an Unconventional Foe](#) From Library of Congress.

[Terrorism In Early America](#) From *Early America Review*.

[Terrorists by Another Name: The Barbary Pirates](#) From *Washington Post*.

## **A C T I V I T Y**

### **Is Paying Ransom Ever Right?**

Divide the class into five groups. Each group should discuss one of the ransom scenarios described below. Each group will decide whether the U.S. government should pay the ransom demanded in the scenario. Finally, the groups should report their decisions and reasoning to the rest of the class.

### **Ransom Scenarios**

1. A nation at war with the United States demands \$1 million for each of its 1,000 American prisoners of war.
2. A nation hostile to the United States shoots down an American spy plane, killing all the crew. The country demands \$50 million for the return of the dead airmen.
3. A violent mob surrounds American diplomats in a U.S. embassy. The country where this is taking place demands military weapons in exchange for protecting the diplomats.

4. A group of desperate terrorists has captured a civilian airliner in flight with men, women, and children aboard. The terrorists demand \$100 million deposited in a Swiss bank account or they will crash the aircraft.
5. A radical American organization threatens to blow up a federal building in a major city unless certain federal prisoners are released.