

AMERICA'S FIRST ENCOUNTERS WITH TERRORISTS

BY THOMAS V. DI BACCO

Terrorism against the United States predates the American Revolution, with the nation's early history with the Middle East and North Africa the focus of concern. Over time, only the names of the attacking nations have changed a bit—Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. From the 1500s, these so-called Barbary States plied their piratical trade on commerce in the Mediterranean.

They took the ships of European nations, confiscated their cargoes, and imprisoned sailors and travelers alike, demanding ransom for their release. Given the slow communication of the time, captives often died before negotiations could take place, usually as a result of harsh treatment.

During America's colonial days, Britain dealt with the Barbary

pirates by paying tribute or protection money. After the American Revolution, the United States did the same. The reason, at first, was simply tradition, following Europe's rationale. Namely, in an age when

Europe was perceived to be the center of the universe's civilization, peoples outside the continent were looked upon as inferior and unworthy of proper concern.

The barbar-

ian nature of the Barbary States, with their piracy and contempt for Western rules of warfare, confirmed their status as the lowest of the low. Better to pay them off than to acknowledge their humanity through warfare. As one official reasoned: "Bribery ... answers their purpose better ... than a noble retaliation."



A pirate siege is re-enacted in Tampa in the 1960s. Photo courtesy of Florida Photographic Collection.

The administrations of George Washington and John Adams paid enormous amounts of tribute money, in spite of the increasingly popular cry, “Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute.” In 1796, precisely \$992,463.25 was paid to Algiers for 100 captives—the ransom included a three-gun frigate worth \$100,000 and numerous arms, as well as ammunition—and American officials committed an additional \$21,000 for annual tribute to Algiers. What was worse, however, was that piratical attacks continued, and more money had to be paid in 1800, as well as goods ranging from oak planks to tar to “5 red birds and cages.”

When Thomas Jefferson assumed office in 1801, he broke with the patient, accommodating policy of his predecessors and went to war against Tripoli, the country that appeared to be the leader of attacks against American ships. To Jefferson, piracy cried out for retaliation by the United States as a violation of human rights that made normal diplomatic crises look like a game of chess. As for the paying of tributes, Jefferson was appalled. “When this idea comes across my mind,” he said, “my faculties are absolutely suspended between indignation and impatience.”

The Tripolitan War that Jefferson initiated in 1801 was a response to Tripoli’s demand for \$225,000 in a lump-sum payment and a \$25,000 annual tribute. The war ran for four years and would be accorded lasting significance in the Marine Hymn

(“From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli”) and was replete with emotional incidents and heroes, most notably, Stephen Decatur. Young Decatur of the schooner *Enterprise* captured a Tripolitan vessel, which was renamed the *Intrepid*—after its cargo of courageous American seamen—and eventually was used in a daring mission.

Specifically, the *Intrepid* was appropriately disguised, placed under Decatur’s command, and ordered to sail into Tripoli’s harbor for the purpose of setting fire to an American frigate that had been captured earlier. Why this action against an American ship named the *Philadelphia*, especially since it had been the flagship of Decatur’s father some years earlier? Honor appears to have been the major reason, as well as the fact that the Tripolitans were using the man-of-war against other American ships.

On the night of February 16, 1804, the mission to set the *Philadelphia* afire was completed without the loss of any American lives. Awarded a captain’s commission, Decatur later in the war narrowly escaped death in a dramatic capture of two other enemy ships, an episode in which his brother James was killed. Peace came in 1805, although the treaty was not without embarrassment in that the United States was required to pay ransom for prisoners.

And no sooner had the ink on the treaty dried than the incursions of other Barbary States became significant. Foremost was Algiers, whose attacks were like periodic bee

stings interspersed with periods of inaction that made it difficult for Jefferson's successor, James Madison, to retaliate militarily. So more money was paid out, especially as the United States became involved in the War of 1812 with Britain, which provided a golden opportunity for Algiers to expand its attacks on American commerce. In the summer of 1812, for example, 12 Americans were captured by Algerian pirates. Washington officials attempted to negotiate for their release through an intermediary, but the Algerian ruler went beyond the bounds of prudent negotiation. "My policy and my views," he said, "are to increase, not to diminish, the number of American slaves, and that not for a million dollars would I release them."

No sooner than the War of 1812 was concluded in early 1815 than President Madison turned to Captain Decatur again with a squadron of 10 ships to extract a treaty with Algiers and the other Barbary States abolishing the tribute system, releasing American prisoners, and providing for compensation of seized properties. The show of force brought about the capitulation of Algiers and each one of the remaining Barbary nations. The result: no more incursions and no more tributes.

Once again, Decatur returned

home a hero. Yet, the specter of a mighty nation having to show its military force to areas of the world that were ill-equipped to defend themselves and richly deserved military and diplomatic obscurity brought forth still another predicament: whether it was wrong for the United States to redress such wrongs. No one was more aware of this controversy than Decatur, who appeared at a victory celebration in

his honor in Norfolk in April 1816. During the innumerable toasts of the festive occasion, Decatur contributed his own.

"Our country," he noted, "in her intercourse with foreign nations, may she always be in the right, but our country, right or wrong."

The reputation of James Madison in these difficult foreign policy matters, with Britain and the Barbary States, was

significantly enhanced, as illustrated by Drew R. McCoy's assessment of him in Eric Foner and John F. Garrarty, editors, *The Reader's Companion to American History* (1991): "...the young nation emerged from that 'Second War of Independence' with a new measure of unity and self-confidence. Madison thus enjoyed tremendous popularity during his last years as president and his nineteen years in retirement, when he was widely revered for his role both in founding and in securing the first

To page 49 >

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government spending, and a lack of transparency and oversight are the tools through which the Left has won. They are the shadows and corners in which tyrants thrive.”

Think Global. Act Local. “The Right is local in spirit but regretfully top-down in practice.” But as O’Hara states, “One of the key factors in the tea parties’ success was local organization. At the end of the day, the rallies happened on the ground, city-by-city, town-by-town, and decisions had to be made at the local level.” O’Hara wrote this book when he was with the Heartland Institute, which, like the James Madison Institute, is a member of the State Policy Network (SPN). He has since moved to the Illinois Policy Institute, another SPN affiliate in Illinois. His advice to tea party activists: Work with the free-market organization in your state and with local organizations in your communities.

Apply founding principles to new challenges. We aren’t looking for new ideals, but rather how to apply

the timeless ideals of our nation’s founding to the new challenges we face today and in the future.



Despite the trials our country faces, O’Hara leaves us with a resounding optimism about the future of this movement and our nation. He says that in the long term “we can and will win this fight on the strength of our ideas.” The tea party movement is made up of hundreds of thousands of Americans, most of whom got involved in the political process in ways they never had before. That itself is a testament to the American spirit, a spirit that seems to arise at least once every generation to tackle challenges that seem insurmountable at the time. If this book, written by 25-year old O’Hara, is any testament, the American spirit will endure. ☞

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TERRORISTS *(Continued from page 43)*

great modern republic.”

Subsequently, unseemly activities of the Middle East and North Africa assumed a more muted place in American foreign policy—until, of course, the history of the last decades saw terrorism metastasize into chilling incidents and threats

on our own soil. ☞

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