

Joshua E. London **Victory in Tripoli: How America's War with the Barbary Pirates established the U.S. Navy and Built a Nation.** Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005. 288 pp. Photos. Bib. Index. \$24.95.

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It was perhaps with some irony that Thomas Jefferson observed, “Timid men prefer the calm of despotism to the tempestuous sea of liberty”; for the ‘freedom of the sea’ itself was a serious contention during Jefferson’s own presidency (1801-1809). Nowhere was this dichotomy between a strong federal government and personal liberties—and between the new American republic’s need for proper naval defense and political (and financial) expediency—put more to the test than in the Barbary Wars (1801-1805, 1815). Joshua London, a political analyst by trade, offers us a piercing examination of this fascinating though often-overlooked period of U.S. naval history and international relations, which “would give birth to the U.S. Navy and the Marine Corps. It would also raise serious questions about the president’s right to wage undeclared wars, the need to balance defense spending against domestic appropriations, the use of foreign surrogates to fight our battles, and even whether or not it was a good idea to trade arms and money for the release of hostages.”

By the end of the Revolutionary War, maritime commerce in the Mediterranean was overshadowed by systemic piracy; a protection racket engineered by the cooperation of the Old World powers with the four Ottoman-controlled North African states (Morocco, Tunis, Algiers and Tripoli). Rather than continue the weary thousand-year struggle between Christianity and Islam head-on, European monarchies settled into the strategic

manipulation of the Barbary pirates' unending 'holy war at sea', or *al-jihad fi'l-bahr*, against one another. Richer states could thus enjoy the fruits of free trade, while watching their weaker competitors fall prey to 'barbarians' (who enslaved most of their captives). Stripped from the protection of the British Royal Navy, Americans now had to choose whether to pay 'tribute' or fight. As London notes, neither choice would be easy. The 'United States' itself, though newly bound by the ratified Constitution, was nevertheless weakened by intense political rivalries and sectional interests which effectually handicapped American diplomacy. The South, for one, had little interest in a strong (Federal) navy. Furthermore, it was not until 1792 that Congress was able to procure \$100,000 for 'peace treaties' and the release of American hostages long held under ransom in Algiers.

Complications associated with the Napoleonic Wars, however, unravelled most of these efforts, and re-emphasized the need for a U.S. Navy ready to address short-term emergencies (against the Barbary pirates) as well as confront long-term, potential adversaries (namely Britain or France). Yet the first U.S. retaliatory strikes against Pasha Yusuf Qaramanli's inflated extortions were more embarrassing than honorable. The frigate *Philadelphia* ran aground in Tripoli harbor and was burned to avoid capture, with Captain William Bainbridge and his crew taken as prisoners. An attempt to blow up the Pasha's fortifications with a gunpowder-packed USS *Intrepid* likewise failed. Successful attacks by subsequent American frigates led to the immediate acceptance of peace offers, but these were soon violated by the Barbary Powers when American forward presence was weakened in the interests of national economy. Only William Eaton's expedition of

U.S.-supplied and led Arab insurgents against the strategic port-city of Derna—a presidential-backed attempt at regime change in Tripoli—managed to force a peace. Even then, London concludes, “While the arrangement freed the hostages and obliged Tripoli to end its war against American shipping, it did nothing to penalize Qaramanli or actually restore national honor, and it tied treaty fulfilment to the promises of a murdering pirate.” It took a renewed ‘war’ in 1815, punctuated by even bloodier frigate actions against Algerian corsairs, before the peace really stuck.

This is a valuable work boasting an impressive array of research (much of it utilizing newly digitized archival sources via the internet), despite the deliberate absence of citations to directly support the narrative for the sake of ‘story’—which is quite good, and indeed well told. Photos and illustrations are adequate, but the impact of Eaton’s epic 500-mile trek across the Libyan Desert is not supplemented by a map, while the 1685 (why 1685?) ‘Map of the Mediterranean’ is so digitally fuzzy as to be worthless. In one sense, there was no conflict at all between the needs of freedom *and* security, as Jefferson argued. However, as *Victory in Tripoli* shows, there are often mitigating factors both politicians and navy professionals ignore at their peril. War (and peace) is seldom ‘absolute’. As such, the author hardly needs to capitalize on obvious, tempting parallels with politicized statements such as “Whether to give in to or actively fight against terrorism remains one of the most fundamental decisions of U.S. foreign policy to this day.” Good history, after all, is revealing; *great* history is insightful.