AMERICA'S FIRST MIDDLE EAST CRISIS

by Robin U. Russin

The situation in the middle east is an infuriating stalemate. Americans abroad have been seized, some tortured to death, by militant Islamic groups at war with the United States and each other. Freedom of navigation is in jeopardy. The incumbent President's administration is fundamentally divided: some want to strike back, while others advocate a negotiated ransom. The opposing super-powers exploit the situation to their advantage, ignoring or even colluding with the terrorists. At first, envoys are secretly dispatched to the Arabs with money, arms, and symbolic tokens of American goodwill. Even foreign priests are enlisted. A few hostages are released, but more are seized, and the demands increase. The President loses his re-election bid.

The popular new President bombs Tripoli and rallies public opinion, but real results are elusive. And then a young officer experienced in dealing with the Islamic despots comes to him with an audacious plan. It will require covert funding, and a crack commando squad. The plan is tentatively agreed to. In spite of the risk to both men and national prestige, President Thomas Jefferson decides to send in the Marines.

It is always unfair to draw parallels between widely separated periods in history; innumerable variables make true comparison impossible. Still, as the United States enters its third century, harassed by intractable powers abroad and hamstrung by lack of answers at home, it is astonishing and perhaps instructive to recall how our country faced a similar challenge when it was barely into its third decade. Today Jefferson's undeclared war with the Barbary pirates of North Africa is barely noted, lost in the larger events of the period--the Louisiana Purchase, the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars--and yet it was one of the first and most important tests of the young democracy.

At first glance Thomas Jefferson hardly seems the man to have advocated military solutions. As Governor of Virginia during the Revolution he had been embarrassed by his handling of the British invasion; he had long made it clear that he was a committed pacifist, a gentle country scholar who preferred plowing the fields of his beloved Virginia to jousting in the brutal world of politics and war. And yet,

after neither Washington, the great warrior, nor Adams, the tough Federalist, had solved the problem of the pirates, it fell to the peaceful farmer to end their depredations.

In fact, although deeply uneasy about the military, Jefferson had long been convinced that in this one arena military resistance was the only answer. The Barbary powers--Tripoli, Tunis, Algeria and Morocco--had been marauding for decades, afflicting not only the Americans but every country that traded through the Mediterranean. Some, like Spain, Naples and Portugal, maintained a fitful state of war, but with their empires and merchant marines in decline they lacked resolve and ended up paying anyway. The two great powers, England and France, found it worth paying the "tribute" to keep the pirates going and harassing weaker trade rivals. Their strong navies enforced their treaties--and their monopolies, sinking or commandeering those ships that got past the pirates. America's naval worries were hardly limited to the corsairs.

In the years after the Revolution the United States struggled, literally, to keep afloat. Deeply in debt, America depended on trade for financial survival, importing manufactures and generating revenue through the export of raw materials. Before the Revolution, 75% of British maritime trade had been carried by American ships. America retained its fine merchant marine, but could not defend it. The British maintained a virtual blockade, confiscating ships and impressing American sailors into their navy. And then there were the Barbary pirates. One painful result of all this was that while Lloyd's insured British merchant ships at a rate of 1.5% , it charged American vessels a full quarter of their value. The inability of Congress to create a viable military answer was part of what motivated the Constitutional Convention of 1787.

As early as 1784 Jefferson protested against the European practice of paying hundreds of thousands of dollars to buy peace with the Arabs. Writing from France to Congressman James Monroe, he insisted: "Surely our people will not give this... we ought to begin a naval power, if we mean to carry on our own commerce. Can we begin it on a more honorable occasion or with a weaker foe?" As much as he hated war, he hated even more the idea of his country held hostage by petty despots.

Although many regarded the Barbary states with disdain, as the corrupt remains of the once mighty Moslem empire, they had proved again and again how effective and how deadly they could be, something Jefferson recognized in 1785: "The attempts heretofore made to suppress these powers have been to exterminate them at one blow. They are too numerous and powerful for that. A small effort, but long continued, seems to be the only method." He looked beyond the immediate threat: "Were we possessed even of a small naval force what a bridle would it be...The present disrespect of the nations of Europe for us will inevitably bring on insults which must involve us in war. A coward is much more exposed to quarrels than a man of spirit."

Therefore it came as no surprise when Jefferson learned a few months later that the English were actively encouraging Algeria to attack American ships. The excessive institutional power of the British navy had made many American statesmen wary of creating their own, but Jefferson saw the greater danger. "If we wish our commerce to be free and uninsulted, we must let these nations see that we have the energy which at present they disbelieve... [They] must see the rod; perhaps it must be felt by some...a naval force can never endanger our liberties."

The Continental Congress, however, was statutorily incapable of creating a navy. Instead they authorized $80,000 in ransom payments, with which Jefferson, working as Minister to France, was to arrange a peace settlement. Jefferson's envoy to Morocco, the experienced Thomas Barclay, did the best he could and managed to negotiate a relatively inexpensive treaty. John Lamb, the emissary to Algiers, had less success in his mission to free twenty-one American hostages. Peace with Algiers, he fumed, would "cost a Tower of Constantinople." Eventually, it did.

In February of 1786 Jefferson hurried to London; John Adams, his counterpart in England, had met three times with the ambassador from Tripoli. Adams had a reputation for a short temper and a wickedly acid tongue, but what he described made even Jefferson's blood boil. Not only had the Tripolitan ambassador demanded a tribute vastly beyond the means of the United States, but he had elaborated with great pride on his country's long history of piracy and extortion. The Barbary states, he explained, were perfectly entitled to rob and enslave Americans, who were after all ungodly Christian sinners. It was practically a religious obligation to do so.

Adams had in the meantime concluded a tentative commercial treaty with Portugal, which was also fighting a futile war with the pirates. From this, Jefferson took courage. Returning to Paris, he drew up a plan to ally America with Portugal and the other smaller European sea powers and create an international patrol for the Mediterranean. The scheme found little support at home or abroad. The smaller powers were in contentious disarray, and America had nothing concrete to offer. International disregard for the new nation was graphically demonstrated when George III contemptuously turned his back on Adams and Jefferson.

Another year passed as Jefferson agonized over the treatment of the American prisoners. They were kept in heavy shackles, fed only bread and vinegar until they could be sold into slavery, where they were whipped or worked to death. Desperate to help them, in January of 1787 Jefferson secretly approached the Mathurin priests, a French religious order, to see if they could persuade the pirates to release some of the prisoners for a small ransom. At the same time, he quietly tried to arrange a loan for the amount from the Dutch bankers who had helped Adams refinance the United States after the Revolution. His efforts failed at both ends. The Arabs were intransigent, and the Dutch refused him, citing America's already enormous and overdue debt. By 1789, the priests were in any event distracted by concerns closer to home--the cataclysm of the French Revolution. Jefferson must have felt personally the irony that St. Mathurin was the patron of fools and idiots.

Although 1789 seemed to offer new hope, as Jefferson became George Washington's first Secretary of State, the next few years saw a tiresome repetition of the old pattern. Tribute and ransom was paid, more Americans were seized and ransom demands increased. Finally, in 1793, Washington was persuaded to ask Congress to fund the construction of a navy. The Congress, reluctant to antagonize Britain, took a year to approve $700,000 for six new frigates--upon the strict condition that construction would cease if a diplomatic peace were achieved with the north African states.

When news of Congress's action reached the Dey of Algiers, he shrewdly agreed to sign a peace treaty and return his hostages. They now numbered one hundred and fifteen; of the original twenty-one, eleven had died. His price was a mere

$1,000,000, plus the "gift" of a large 36-gun frigate worth $100,000. Congress approved the pact and similar costly treaties with Tunis and Tripoli. Construction of the navy was suspended, as the Dey's "gift" made its way to Algiers.

For the next few years events in France and Europe--the Terror, the executions of Louis XVI and Robespierre and the rise of Napoleon--eclipsed the less momentous problem of the African corsairs. When Jefferson ran against John Adams in the Presidential campaign of 1796, a major issue dividing them was the renewed war between England and France. France had of course supported America during the Revolution, and Republicans like Jefferson felt that our alliance still rested with them. But the Federalists like Adams and Hamilton thought that France had succumbed to mob anarchy. They favored England for reasons of elitism, common tradition and economic necessity: the American economy had been wrecked by years of punitive English policies. The Federalists hoped to reverse this with John Jay's pro-English trade agreement negotiated two years earlier, a pact which had infuriated the Republicans. When Adams defeated Jefferson he tried to continue normalizing relations with the monarch who had snubbed him a decade earlier, while mollifying his opposition; but the French were not so easily pacified and relations quickly deteriorated.

By 1797 the fleet of French privateers in the Caribbean and Atlantic had grown to over 150 ships, plundering the lucrative British West Indies commerce in sugar, rum, gold, spices and slaves. These mercenaries rarely made distinctions, but now attacks against American shippers became unofficial policy. Nor had the Barbary pirates ceased their activities just because they were out of the news. On a single day in September of 1797, the United States suffered a typical, double humiliation. Algiers violated their million-dollar treaty and hijacked another American vessel in the Mediterranean, while across the Atlantic off of Santo Domingo the notorious French privateer *L'Insurgente* captured the U.S. *Salem*, slaughtering her helmsman after a six-hour chase. When Richard Weaver, the *Salem's* captain, protested this bald piracy, the French captain just shrugged. What was the American going to do about it? Years before, Jefferson had predicted that "an insult unpunished is the parent of many others;" he had expected such insults from tyrants, but not from the great country he regarded as the birthplace of republican values.

Neither Jefferson nor Adams had really wanted the Presidency, and Adams faced a terrible dilemma when he came to office. He had committed himself to a pro-English course in order to save the economy--but he could not risk provoking France, which with each of General Bonaparte's victories was becoming more dangerous and powerful. The French "Directory," last and most terrible of the pre-Napoleonic regimes, had already rebuffed President Washington's emissary, Charles C. Pinckney. Without either military or diplomatic recourse, French piracy went unchecked. The New England sea captains in despair organized and presented a petition for action to Secretary of State Thomas Pickering. It included a list of over three hundred captured ships.

Finally Adams dispatched three commissioners--including Pinckney--to try and improve relations. They were insolently received: in what became known as the infamous "XYZ Affair," the French demanded bribes amounting to a quarter of a million dollars before even beginning negotiations. Pinckney, a brilliant man who had helped shape the U.S. Constitution, rebelled. In an indignant rage he is said to have slammed his fist down on the table: "Millions for defense, sirs, but not one cent for tribute!"

Many in the United States, angry and sick of abuse, rallied behind this cry. Riots between supporters of France and England erupted in the streets, while the viciously xenophobic Alien and Sedition acts were passed in the Congress; Jefferson, disillusioned and dispirited, retreated to Monticello. Adams cagily resisted the popular rush to war but declared, "I will never send another minister to France without assurances that he will be received, respected and honored as the representative of a great, free, powerful and independent nation." That same month the flagship of the new Navy, the *Constitution*, was finished and launched. Ironically, during the Revolution, after the colonies had broken relations with Britain, France had signed a treaty guaranteeing protection "to American vessels and effects against all violence, insults, attacks or depredations on the part of the Princes and States of Barbary..." But the navy post-Revolutionary America built to fight the corsairs first saw action against its old ally.

Adams confined his actions against France to the Caribbean sea lanes, avoiding a larger conflict, but he got

spectacular results. The new navy soon gained a ferocious reputation, defeating scores of French privateers in pitched battles, killing hundreds of enemy crewmen and wrecking their vessels. Perhaps the sweetest victory was won by the frigate *Constellation* under Captain Thomas Truxton, a tough, disciplined veteran. After a first fruitless tour, Truxton fired nearly all his junior officers in disgust and engaged his new crew in rigorous training. As a result, when they met up with their old nemesis, the *L'Insurgente*, they destroyed her in an hour. The *Constellation* also had a taste of *La Vengeance*, a much larger French battleship which they nearly sank before it escaped into the cover of the night.

The U.S. Navy, like its country, had been built along new and daring lines. The man commissioned to build the frigates was possibly the greatest naval architect of his time, Joshua Humphreys of Philadelphia. In a letter to George Washington, Humphreys outlined his thoughts: "As our navy will for a considerable time be inferior in numbers, we are to consider what...will be most formidable and be an overmatch for those of the enemy; such frigates as in blowing weather would be an overmatch for double-deck ships and in light winds to evade coming into action." To give his ships speed Humphreys had emulated the sleek lines of the Baltimore clipper, but at a much larger scale. The frigates were also heavily reinforced with massive beams to give them the structural fortitude and gun capacity of the rugged line-of-battle ships. Various smaller ships filled out the new navy.

America recruited the most capable crews to man them by offering the most competitive wages and living conditions, instead of impressing or virtually enslaving their crews as the French and British did. Not all of the captains or crews were equally well suited to military service, but there was no lack of talent--or of spirit. More than a few tars were anxious to even the score with the pirates and privateers. The Europeans ridiculed the strange frigates, but not for long. Within three years the French, over-committed in Europe and no longer willing to risk antagonizing the tough American navy, signed a satisfactory treaty. And success was not only measured in military terms, as the cost of insuring American merchants dropped by over eight million dollars--nearly four times the cost of the whole navy.

On March 4, 1801, Thomas Jefferson reluctantly took the leadership of a nation in turmoil. His motto had always been "peace is my passion," but the new century seemed to bring with it only violence and danger: the Alien and Sedition acts jeopardized freedom and harmony at home; George Washington, the great stabilizing force in American politics, had just died; Napoleon had plunged all of Europe into a war which again threatened to engulf America, as Spain ceded to France the vast Louisiana territory west of the Mississippi; and America was still being victimized in the Mediterranean.

Under John Adams the Navy had been fully occupied with the French problem, and the Barbary powers had continued to receive tribute. By the time he left office, the pirates had extorted over two million dollars, as well as guns, powder and trinkets. It hardly prevented further piracies. Among the envoys sent to negotiate with them was William Eaton. A big, spirited Connecticut Yankee, Eaton had run away from home as a boy to fight in the Revolution. Tireless and obsessively patriotic, he never suffered orders easily--which once got him suspended and nearly court-martialed--but he especially loathed this assignment. His assessment of the Barbary despots was typically unequivocal: "There is not a scoundrel among them...who will not beg and steal."

Jefferson had barely taken office when another irate emissary visited him. William Bainbridge, captain of the frigate *George Washington*, had been dispatched to bring the annual tribute to the Dey of Algiers. Bainbridge had once been captured by the French privateers; now he had been disgraced by the Algerians. The Dey had commandeered his ship and insisted that Bainbridge ferry the Dey's ambassador to Turkey, with the Algerian flag replacing the Stars and Stripes. He had calmly pointed out to the outraged American that those who pay tribute to a master are clearly his slaves. Bainbridge had reviewed the batteries of cannon aimed at his ship from the fortifications on shore and submitted. Actually, the Sultan of Constantinople received him graciously, granting him a safe passage back and berating the Algerians. Bainbridge had made the best of a bad situation, becoming an impromptu ambassador, but now he returned and confronted the President. He had kept the peace, but he begged that he never be sent again to Algiers unless it was with orders to fight.

Only two months into his Presidency Jefferson learned that the Pasha Yusuf Caramanli of Tripoli, jealous over American concessions to Algiers, had cut down the U.S. flag and declared war. Yusuf was a shrewd and ruthless operator reputed to have killed his father and a brother, taking the throne after forcing another older brother, Hamet, into exile. His price for peace was another quarter of a million dollars. The situation had become intolerable. No longer pinned down by the French privateers at home, Jefferson at last initiated the course of action he had advocated for so many years, sending in a navy to blockade the port of Tripoli and escort U.S. ships.

The initial force dispatched was small. Commodore Richard Dale chafed under orders to maintain a defensive posture, but he did the best use he could, guarding American merchants by preventing the passage of Tripolitan vessels at Gibraltar, his base of operations. And while his blockade of Tripoli did not disable the Pasha, it did discourage Tunis and Algiers from forming a military alliance with Tripoli and reneging on their own treaties. The American's only fight came when the schooner *Enterprize* intercepted and destroyed a Tripolitan man-of-war roving in search of American merchantmen, something Jefferson referred to this as "the only exception to this state of general peace with which we have been blessed." He felt far less sanguine than he sounded; he wanted more definitive results. When Dale's tour expired the new commander, Captain Richard Morris, was given more ships and more latitude to initiate offensive action if necessary.

Morris, however, proved far less capable than his predecessor. He was a lethargic leader given to avoiding danger, much to the annoyance of aggressive commanders under him like the young Captain John Rodgers, who had been 1st Lieutenant aboard the *Constellation* when it defeated *L'Insurgente*. Part of his problem was simply that the corsairs were more experienced and knew the territory better, striking quickly and then seeking hidden refuge along the difficult coast. But Morris failed to give direction or dispel the tensions which months of inaction produced between ships. Worse, his inaction had encouraged the other north African states to follow Tripoli's example and declare war. Decrying the "two years' sleep," Jefferson recalled Captain Morris in 1803 and made an example of him; Morris was reprimanded and cashiered for negligence, while Rodgers was given temporary command of the squadron. What

the President needed was a man with some fire in him. The man he chose was Captain Edward Preble.

Tall, thin and acerbic, Edward Preble suffered from ulcers and a violent temper. He had fought well in the Revolution and later in the Caribbean against the French. His new command included the big frigates *Constitution* and *Philadelphia*, the pride of the Navy, as well as the battle-tested *Enterprize*. Never one to ingratiate himself, Preble exclaimed "Nothing but a pack of boys!" when he saw that the men and officers placed under his command averaged 20 years younger than himself, and upon setting out for the Mediterranean he confronted them with a stern warning: "The honor of the American flag is very dear to me," he growled, "I hope it will not be tarnished under my command." Unlike his more relaxed predecessors, Preble criticized his men openly and often, and at first they bitterly resented his harsh training.

As the squadron neared Gibraltar one night, an unknown ship suddenly loomed in the darkness near the *Constitution*. Preble demanded identification. When no answer came, he threatened to open fire. At last the ship responded: "This is his Britannic Majesty's ship *Donegal*, 84 [guns], Sir Richard Strachan, and English commodore. Send your boat on board." Preble clambered up the rigging and exploded: "This is the United States ship *Constitution*, 44 [guns], Edward Preble, an American commodore who will be damned before he sends his boat on board of any vessel!" Preble then called down a curt order: "Blow your matches, boys!" The English captain quickly backed down and sent over his own boat. He turned out to be Commander George Elliot of the *Maidstone*--34 guns, a frigate much smaller than the *Constitution*--who had been trying to bluff his way out of a surprise encounter. But Preble had been willing to call the bluff and take on a ship twice his size, and his men were impressed. It would not be the last time; they soon came to hold the gruff little captain in awe, counting it a badge of honor to be known as "Preble's Boys."

William Bainbridge, too, started off his new assignment under Preble with distinction. Preceding the *Constitution* across the Atlantic in the *Philadelphia*, Bainbridge had sighted and hailed two suspicious vessels. They claimed to be a Moroccan, the *Mirboha*, peacefully escorting the American merchantman *Celia.* Bainbridge knew that America was supposedly at peace with the Emperor of Morocco, having bought a treaty from him several years earlier, but

something was wrong; the American crew was not in evidence. Bainbridge quickly ordered the *Mirboha* boarded, and discovered the Americans in shackles below decks. Apparently Morocco, too, was testing the will of the United States.

Preble joined the *Philadelphia* in the Mediterranean and took over Rodgers' command of the squadron, but not without a few fireworks. The two men had been fierce rivals for years, each anxious to be regarded as the new Thomas Truxton. Though over ten years Preble's junior, John Rodgers was actually his superior in rank thanks to his promotion for valor in the *L'Insurgente* action, and he deeply resented not having had the chance to prove himself here after months of languishing under Morris. Finally their grudging mutual respect overcame their hostility, and Rodgers carried out Preble's orders to return to the Atlantic.

Preble quickly established his base in Sicily and divided the squadron. His two priorities were dealing with Morocco and blockading the port of Tripoli. William Bainbridge, fresh from the *Mirboha* success, was only too happy to take the *Philadelphia* into action against Tripoli, and left the Moroccan and her crew in Preble's hands. Preble could be a martinet, but he treated his prisoners kindly. They were actually a warm-hearted, friendly bunch--too friendly, as it turned out, when they tried to sexually seduce the younger boys in his crew.

Leading his squadron to the heavily fortified bay of Tangier, the capitol of Morocco, Preble sailed unhesitatingly into firing range, aimed the *Constitution's* cannons directly at the Emperor's palace and demanded an interview. He took ashore only a few essential companions, leaving orders that the squadron be kept on combat alert. They were to warn away any passing American merchants and to commence a full attack on the castle at the slightest provocation, including the event of his own detention, regardless of his personal safety.

One version goes that upon approaching the Emperor Maulay Sulaiman in his grand palace, Preble refused either to surrender his pistol or to kneel as instructed: "Americans do not kneel to any man." When the Emperor threatened to imprison him, Preble threatened to reduce Tangier to ruins, at which the Emperor gave in.

The facts are a little less sparkling, but essentially similar. Sulaiman, a small, harassed man, met the Americans out in the street without formal ceremony. On the advice of his subordinate Hashash, a man of ambition, the Emperor had embarked on a tentative war to see how much he could bully out of the United States. He now had his answer. If he surrendered all captured American men and property and abided by his treaty, then Preble would return the *Mirboha* and leave in peace; if not, the American squadron would level Tangier. Well aware of the massive firepower assembled in his harbor, Sulaiman was only too anxious to reaffirm his agreement with the United States, without mention of additional tribute. The American flagpole was replaced and the U.S. Consul received an apology along with promises of stern punishment for Hashash. Satisfied, Preble calmly returned to the *Constitution*, leading a flotilla of captured American merchantmen. The squadron set sail without further incident.

Preble's plan to join Bainbridge and turn the full force of their two mighty frigates against Tripoli was suddenly shattered: the *Philadelphia* had been taken. Overly eager to engage the enemy, Bainbridge had chased a corsair into the port of Tripoli at low tide and had run aground on a hidden reef. Heeled over on her side, the *Philadelphia's* guns were useless. Bainbridge dropped most of them overboard, pumped out all the drinking water, cut away inessential timbers, frantically trying to lighten the vessel and break free, to no effect. He was quickly surrounded by a swarm of gunboats. Under heavy fire, he tried to scuttle the frigate, but did a poor job of it before being forced to surrender--his third time. Bainbridge and his crew of three hundred were stripped, abused and paraded through the streets up to the castle, where the Pasha added them to his slave pens. At flood tide the frigate was safely floated off the reef and moored in the harbor, within view of Bainbridge's cell. It now flew the colors of Tripoli. Preble fumed; if only Bainbridge had a little less surrender in him and more willingness to fight to the death, perhaps this wouldn't have happened. The tormented captain managed to smuggle notes out to Preble begging for vengeance, but his commander's concerns were more practical.

Preble's immediate response was to throw a tight blockade around the harbor. It was one of the harshest winters his crew had ever seen, and Preble shifted his quarters from ship to ship in order to share discomfort of his men as he

tried to formulate a plan. On a mission to reconnoiter the *Philadelphia* Lt. Stephen Decatur, the steely young commander of the sloop *Enterprize*, had captured an antique ketch flying Ottoman colors but carrying damning materials from the *Philadelphia*. With this new addition to his fleet, what Preble now proposed was entirely in character.

Renaming the ketch the *Intrepid*, Preble packed her with ammunition and explosives. The idea was to sail her into the harbor at night and torch the *Philadelphia*, and then escape under cover of a gunboat hiding just out of sight. Lt. Decatur asked for volunteers; Preble's Boys were spoiling for a fight, and every man stepped forward. Decatur selected his best men--including one foreigner, who was the key to the mission's success. Salvator Catalano was a Sicilian pilot, fluent in Arabic, who had long dreamed of coming to America. He had been in Tripoli and actually witnessed the ketch join in the humiliation of the *Philadelphia* and her crew. He now volunteered to guide the rechristened *Intrepid* into the harbor.

On a chill February night the *Intrepid* entered the harbor. Most of the crew hid below decks; those that were visible were dressed in Maltese garb. As they eased near to the *Philadelphia*, the sentry challenged them. Catalano replied that they were Maltese merchants who had lost their anchor in a storm at sea. He requested permission to tie up next to the *Philadelphia*, and edged closer. The sentry tossed them a line, but as the two vessels touched he saw his mistake and sent up the alarm: "Americans!" But it was too late. Midshipman Charles Morris described what happened next: "We were near enough and the order 'Board!' was given; and with this cry our men were soon on the decks of the frigate. The surprise had been complete... the enemy made scarcely a show of resistance. A few were killed, one was made prisoner, and the remainder leaped overboard."

Within minutes the explosives were set and lit and the Americans jumped back to the *Intrepid*. Decatur might have been able to sail off with the *Philadelphia*, but Preble felt it would be too dangerous and had given explicit orders to destroy her. Under constant fire from the batteries on shore the crew of the *Intrepid* watched mesmerized as the *Philadelphia* blazed behind them, "commenting upon the beauty of the spray thrown up by the shot between us and the brilliant light of the ship, rather than calculating any danger," as Morris recalled it. To their delight the frigate's overheated starboard cannons as

if by their own will started firing into the fortress. Then the *Philadelphia*, burned free of her moorings, floated out into the harbor and exploded. The *Intrepid* escaped unscathed; not a single man had been lost.

News of the adventure spread quickly. Lord Nelson grudgingly admired it as "the most bold and daring act of the age." Preble recommended Decatur for promotion, and Salvator Catalano was awarded American citizenship. With reports of such courage abroad and the stunning acquisition the Louisiana territory at home, America's prestige under Jefferson was rising meteorically.

Unfortunately, as Jefferson had foreseen it took more than "one blow" to defeat the Pasha, who indignantly increased his demands. Preble impatiently maintained his tight blockade throughout the hard winter and the spring, studying the Pasha's defenses and expanding his own squadron with a number of Sicilian gunboats. His war plan for that summer was as daring as anything he had yet undertaken.

Preble organized his squadron into two divisions, one headed by himself, the other by Stephen Decatur. Decatur was to disable the enemy's first line of defense, the gun-ships, while Preble would sail the *Constitution* right into the harbor and directly attack the Pasha's castle. On Aug. 3, 1804, Preble wrote in his log, "I expect we shall be hurt very much," and then set out. In a few hours of hot combat Decatur's men boarded and took several enemy gunboats. Decatur was in the thick of the fighting when he learned that his brother James, also a lieutenant in the squadron, had been cut down by the captain of an enemy gunboat. Enraged, Decatur hunted him out and attacked the huge corsair with his pike. The two men grappled to the deck, the pirate drawing his dagger, Decatur his cutlass. Holding off the pirate captain with his bare hands, Decatur at last reached for his pistol and killed the man, shooting through his own pocket. The Barbary pirates had long enjoyed a reputation as unbeatable in hand-to-hand fighting, but from that moment on they refused to engage the Americans in close combat.

Upon seeing the squadron approaching the Pasha Yusuf had laughed and invited guests to witness the rout and destruction of the enemy from along the castle's terraces. But his gunboats had failed, and Preble's grim squadron quickly entered, their cannon blazing so fiercely that they

drove not only the spectators but also the Pasha's gunners from the walls. Preble's ships came in so close that the batteries on shore could not aim low enough to hit them. They made pass after pass, pulverizing the outer defenses as the Pasha retreated to his dungeon. But Yusuf did not surrender. Over the next month as Preble repeated the attacks, the Pasha kept himself well hidden, waiting for the autumn storms to deal with the squadron. He was living up to his tough reputation.

Preble knew that if he didn't achieve a breakthrough soon he would have to wait out another hard winter. Deciding upon a desperate action, Preble again loaded the old *Intrepid* with barrels of explosives; this time however she was not going to return. A crew of a dozen volunteers under Lt. Richard Somers was to steer her in under the Pasha's very nose and set her off, escaping in a pair of rowboats. With luck the blast would destroy what was left of the Pasha's fleet and finally bring down his defenses. In any event, Somers vowed not to be taken alive. He wasn't. The anxiously waiting squadron saw an enormous explosion, but it was too far out into the harbor. No one knew exactly what had happened; it appeared that Somers had been intercepted by enemy cruisers. Rather than surrender, he had gone down, taking with him as many of the enemy as possible. Years later Bainbridge, who may have witnessed the disaster from his prison window, would be tormented by guilty suspicions that others felt he should have died the same way.

Meanwhile, five hundred miles across the desert in Egypt, another strange adventure was taking shape. For some time, going all the way back to Morris's command, William Eaton had been pushing an unorthodox--some felt idiotic--undertaking. Eaton was looking to make a name for himself. Acting as U.S. consul in Tunis, he had long been in contact with Pasha Yusuf Caramanli's exiled older brother Hamet. What he proposed was to lead a land army supported by the squadron against Yusuf, topple him, and put Hamet on his "rightful" throne. Hamet, though by all accounts a cowardly and duplicitous man, had vowed eternal friendship to the Americans if they would help him. In 1802 Yusuf had shrewdly aborted such an uprising by giving his brother governorship of the coastal city of Derna, to the east--while holding Hamet's wife and children as "guests" in his own castle. But Hamet had revolted and escaped into hiding in Alexandria, Egypt. In 1803 he contacted Preble offering to act against his brother. Preble was a man of action

like Eaton and responded warmly to the idea, but met resistance from the consul in Algiers, Tobias Lear. Lear distrusted Hamet; furthermore, he felt that American honor would be compromised by dealing with such a character, when they were perfectly capable of an independent victory.

Matters changed when Preble's tour of duty drew to an end. The tragedy of the *Intrepid* had only increased Preble's resolve and he had resumed his attacks with such ferocity that the Pasha began to extend diplomatic feelers. This happened just as reinforcements arrived from America. Although Preble felt he had much left to do, the long, bitter months on the ocean and the strains of battle had taken their toll on his health, and he relinquished his command to Samuel Barron. Preble temporarily gave over the *Constitution* to now-Captain Decatur, pending the return of John Rodgers some weeks later. Eaton chose this moment to pursue his scenario, approaching Jefferson and enlisting Preble's support while he was still stationed in Sicily. Lear vigorously opposed the deal, but Yusuf was still demanding too much and Jefferson and Barron decided to explore the idea. With some misgivings they made Eaton a navy agent, sending him with Captain Isaac Hull's squadron to locate Hamet and begin organizing his forces.

Hamet was no longer in Alexandria. Following the valley of the Nile so recently abandoned by Napoleon, Eaton left the squadron and found his quarry hiding out in a small village thirty miles upriver. Hamet was in genuine terror for his life and had to be cajoled into the venture, which involved a grueling 500-mile march overland to the Bay of Bomba. There Eaton would meet up with Hull's squadron to storm Derna. Succeeding in that, they would advance to Benghazi and on to Tripoli, where Hamet would be crowned as the new Pasha. Eaton must have known that he was promising more than he was authorized to, but Hamet needed every encouragement. In fact, Barron had dispatched Eaton without explicit instructions, assuming that he would return to Sicily and report on his progress. In the absence of orders to the contrary, Eaton sent word to Hull that he was pressing forward with his plan. He gave himself the grand title of "General and Commander-in-Chief."

The army "General" Eaton led was a rag-tag group of eight American marines, several hundred Arabian horsemen and camel-drivers, seventy odd Greek and European mercenaries--some 400 men in all. Throughout the march they quarreled endlessly over pay, rank, religion, rations; occasionally

the Arabs disappeared into the desert for a time, threatening to slaughter the infidel Christians; once Hamet panicked and wanted to turn back. Exasperated, Eaton lined up his marines in formation and threatened to open fire if Hamet didn't continue. Writing in his diary Eaton listed their hardships: "Marched twenty-five miles…neither water nor fuel. The residue of our rice issued today, but the troops were obliged to eat it without cooking." Only Eaton's extraordinary personal energy and zeal held the march together.

But they did reach Bomba, and met up with Hull's squadron. Replenishing their supplies and their energy, Eaton quickly marched his army against the citadel before they had time to desert, while Hull positioned his ships for a naval assault. With the gunboats bombarding the sea walls, Eaton led a headlong charge and overpowered the defenders. As he later recorded, his marines "passed through a shower of musketry from the walls of the houses, took possession of the battery, planted the American flag on its ramparts and turned its guns on the enemy." Eaton was wounded, but for the first time in history, on April 27, 1805 the U.S. flag was raised in victory over Old World territory.

Eaton had little time to enjoy his laurels; twice in the next few weeks Yusuf's men attacked and were barely turned back. The Pasha was not one to give in easily. But he was in a bad situation; his enemy now had a stronghold in his own territory, and the squadron under John Rodgers had continued to pound his defenses in the months since Preble's departure. And then, just as Eaton was preparing his next march, the *Constellation* arrived with news to evacuate--a treaty had been signed. Lear and Barron decided the time had come to offer the Pasha terms, and had purchased peace with him. Eaton felt as if he had been stabbed in the back, as did Preble when he learned of it. It may even have vexed Jefferson himself in some ways when he learned of it; but in fact, it was probably a good compromise.

Bainbridge, still in prison, had been smuggling out correspondence through the Danish and Spanish consuls, in which he reported that the Pasha retained a high degree of loyalty from his people. Hamet on the other hand was generally held in contempt, partially for his own weaknesses, but especially now that he had debased himself by colluding with the Christians. He insisted desperately that the Americans must offer some sort of ransom, some

token to allow the Pasha to save face, if the prisoners were ever going to get out alive. It was a message that Yusuf himself confirmed; he was eager to end the war, but could not risk being seen as vulnerable by his Barbary neighbors. If the Americans insisted on unconditional surrender, he would dig in forever.

Barron, by now seriously ill himself, overrode his more aggressive subordinates and concluded the matter. On June 3, 1805, a new treaty was signed. The formula worked out amounted to around five hundred dollars per prisoner, with the return of a hundred Tripolitan captives. There would be occasional small "gifts" in the future, but no more tribute. Hamet was offered a settlement and sent back into exile.

A few sporadic challenges remained, elsewhere on the coast: later that same year, Jefferson was visited by Suliman Mellimelli, an envoy from Tunis bearing presents and demands for tribute. Jefferson refused to accept either. The following autumn, the offended Bey of Tunis made noises about starting a war with the U.S., but as soon as the *Constitution* under John Rodgers pulled in, decks cleared and ready for action, he changed his mind. The United States had firmly established itself as a naval force to be respected; Lord Nelson observed with classic British understatement "...there is a nucleus of trouble for the Navy of Great Britain." In fact, poor Bainbridge gallantly redeemed himself in the War of 1812, when as captain of the *Constitution* he captured the British warship *Java* off the coast of Brazil.

Upon his return to the United States Eaton became an overnight hero. His exploits had become the stuff of legend, but he could not accept the betrayal he felt he had suffered. Why had they given up, just as a complete victory was in their reach? Launching a vindictive campaign against almost everyone associated with the treaty, in his bitterness he was soon forgotten and died miserably only a few years later. Edward Preble, after his initial fury, had been more generous. He admitted that this at least was peace "on more honorable terms than any other nation has ever been able to command."

The matter could be argued either way; America might have done away with all payments, and it had certainly treated Hamet poorly. On the other hand, the giving of token payments was standard practice for governments at the time;

it was the exorbitant tribute that Jefferson objected to. Further, a complete military victory might have demanded a higher price in lost lives, time, and the destruction of a leader who was willing to settle for a tiny fraction of his original demands. Besides, Eaton had gone beyond his authorization in supporting Hamet, who might well have proved more unstable and duplicitous than his brother. In the end a moderate path was taken, with American interests protected.

As stated, it is hard to draw specific lessons. The world was no less messy and complicated two hundred years ago than it is now; there were many other secondary players, intrigues, mixed signals and jealousies, which cloud the story. And of course the personalities and circumstances have changed--although it must be admitted that certain parallels are startling. If there are lessons, perhaps they are these: Jefferson preferred negotiations, but he recognized that decades of diplomatic failure indicated the necessity for stronger action. He wrote early on that "weakness provokes insult and injury, while a condition to punish it often prevents it." Both parts of this statement, he later discovered, were crucial. Having built and sent in a navy, it quickly became apparent that a mere show of force was as bad as no show at all, maybe worse--it was provocative. Military action was a last resort, but once initiated there then had to be "a condition to punish;" that is, there had to be real military objectives that could be achieved, as well as the will to achieve them (as Morris's experience showed). Equally, those objectives could not be rigid or absolute--at some point the benefits of total victory had to be weighed against the penalties of human and material loss. Jefferson rebelled against submitting to outrageous extortion, but he understood the equal harm of pyrrhic victory; one lacked courage, the other intelligence.

To be sure, Jefferson and some of his subordinates made mistakes, but after twenty years he did accomplish his goals, within the constraints of political reality. His passion for peace had not prevented tough action, nor had his commitment to a military course precluded an appropriate negotiated solution. He had not ended all form of payments to the Barbary governments, but he had discouraged and limited them to acceptable levels. More importantly, he had helped make the oceans safer for American travelers and built up America's damaged prestige. Between the aimlessness of a divided Congress and the

zealotry of a William Eaton, Jefferson and his representatives had achieved a golden mean that may still serve as a model of strength and wisdom in a troubled world.

Notes: I make no pretense about being a historian. I am a storyteller, and this is a great story I thought worth telling, hopefully without too many errors or omissions. For further reading by authors who know more than I, here are my sources: *American State Papers, Foreign Relations*, Vol. 2, (Lowry & Clarke ed.), W.S. Hein; Gardner W. Allen, *Our Navy and the Barbary Corsairs* (Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1905); Noel B. Gerson, *Barbary General; the Life of William H. Eaton* by Samuel Edwards (Prentice-Hall, 1968); Robert C. Goldston, *The Battles of the Constitution: Old Ironsides and the Freedom of the Seas* (MacMillan, 1969); Ray W. Irwin, *The Diplomatic Relations of the United States with the Barbary Powers, 1776-1816* (Russell & Russell, 1970); *Thomas Jefferson: A Biography in His Own Words*; 2 vols. (*Newsweek*, 1974); Allen Johnson, *Jefferson and His Colleagues: a Chronicle of the Virginia Dynasty* (Yale University Press, 1921); Michael L.S. Kitzen, *Tripoli and the United States at War: a History of American Relations with the Barbary States, 1785-1805* (McFarland, 1993); William Ray, *The American Tars in Tripolitan Slavery* (William Abbatt, 1911 *[originally published as: Horrors of Slavery, or, the American Tars in Tripoli*, Oliver Lyon, 1808]); Glen Tucker, *Dawn Like Thunder; the Barbary Wars and the Birth of the U.S. Navy*, (Bobbs-Merrill, 1963); Addison B. C. Whipple, *To the Shores of Tripoli: the Birth of the U.S. Navy and Marines* (William Morrow and Co., 1991); Louis B. Wright & Julia H. Macleod, *The First Americans in North Africa: William Eaton's Struggle for a Vigorous Policy Against the Barbary Pirates*, 1799-1805 (Princeton University Press, 1945).

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