

Foreword

The ADST-DACOR Diplomats and Diplomacy Series

For more than 225 years, extraordinary men and women have represented the United States abroad under all kinds of circumstances. What they did and how and why they did it remains little known to their compatriots. In 1995 the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training (ADST) and the Diplomatic and Consular Officers, Retired (DACOR) created a book series to increase public knowledge and appreciation of the involvement of American diplomats in world history. The series seeks to demystify diplomacy by telling the story of those who have conducted our foreign relations, as they lived, observed, and reported them. Former ambassador and Middle East scholar Richard B. Parker's extensively researched historical account *Uncle Sam in Barbary* well serves these aims.

Written from the viewpoint of a diplomatic practitioner who served in and studied the Arab world for fifty years, this book tells the story of the young American republic's earliest encounter with Islam, beginning in 1785. Front-page news at the time, these events are poorly understood today, even by specialists. Readers will discover that America's response to the challenge presented by the corsair states of North Africa was not what many commentators today imagine. Lucidly written and abundantly instructive, the account presented here holds serious lessons about the limitations of force not backed by diplomacy, lessons of continuing relevance to U.S. foreign policy in a region again presenting a major challenge.

In Ambassador Parker's thirty-one years in the U.S. Foreign Service, he distinguished himself as an Arabic language and area specialist and represented the United States as ambassador to Algeria, Lebanon, and Morocco in the Ford and Carter administrations. He served as ADST's founding president and in 1989 received DACOR's Foreign Service Cup for service in retirement. He has taught at the University of Virginia, Lawrence University, and the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, and edited the

Middle East Journal (1981–87). Ambassador Parker has pursued his research and writing as a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, as the John Adams Fulbright Fellow in London, and as scholar-in-residence at the Middle East Institute. He has published six other books: *North Africa: Regional Tensions and Strategic Concerns* (Praeger, 1984), *The Politics of Miscalculation in the Middle East* (Indiana University Press, 1993), *The Six-Day War* (University Press of Florida, 1996), *The October War* (University Press of Florida, 2001), and guides to Islamic architecture in Cairo and in Morocco. In *Uncle Sam in Barbary*, Dick Parker puts new flesh on an old narrative and discloses surprising details uncovered in his research.

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Preface

This subject, than which none deserves a more affectionate zeal,
has constantly commanded my best exertions.
George Washington to Congress, February 28, 1795

Washington was referring to America's first hostage crisis, which began in 1785 with the capture of two American ships off the coast of Portugal by corsairs from Algiers. This book is a study of that crisis and the diplomacy of its resolution. It tells a story of captives and ransoms—of seamen who spent eleven years as prisoners in Algiers and were finally rescued by a Connecticut poet. It is written from the perspective of a diplomatic practitioner and area specialist who is interested in the operational details: Who were the actors and what did they do? What went right and what went wrong and why? What do we know about the prisoners and their ships? Are there lessons to be learned? While the book is concerned primarily with Algiers, a chapter is devoted to our problems with the rest of Barbary, which are the source of today's popular myths about our North African experience.

America's problems with the rulers of North Africa extended over a period of thirty years, from 1785 to 1815. The story does not loom large in the national consciousness today, but it was a major issue in our early foreign affairs. A list of the Americans actively involved reads like a roll call of the founding fathers: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, James Monroe, Alexander Hamilton, John Paul Jones, and a variety of lesser lights all came into the picture at one point or another. Jefferson was involved with North African issues off and on for more than twenty years.

This episode was America's first challenge from the Muslim world, a challenge it had difficulty meeting. Although a number of commentators since September 11 have cited America's experiences with the "Barbary pirates" as an example of how it must deal with terrorists today, the details of what happened and the nature of the American response two centuries ago are poorly understood by the writers and their readers (or listeners) today. Some will remember vaguely that we fought a battle on the shores of Tripoli, and we must have won or the Marines would not sing about it. None will know anything about the Algiers hostage crisis and how it was resolved, or be

aware of the importance of these incidents in the early history of the United States. Nor is there much knowledge, even among area specialists, of the strange set of rules by which the game was played in the Mediterranean two hundred years ago. There is even uncertainty, in the minds of most Americans, about where “Barbary” was.¹

While this ignorance of history may not seem catastrophic, the misunderstandings of decision makers about what they see as precedents that have been sanctified by time and experience can have fateful consequences for Americans today. Basing a response to today’s terrorism on an imagined response to the Barbary corsairs two centuries ago does not make a great deal of sense.

In the first place, the corsairs were not terrorists as we understand that term today. They were not involved in random killings for political ends. They were interested in booty and ransom money, and there was nothing clandestine about their activities. Their businesslike approach stands in stark contrast to the fanaticism of al-Qa’ida. They were not, as Serge Schmemmann in the January 27, 2002, *New York Times* described them, “international criminals outside the rules of law.” They were operating openly under the instructions of recognized governments and following a formal set of rules that the European powers, and eventually the United States, accepted and honored.

These rules arose from the intermittent hostilities between North Africa and southern Europe that began with the Muslim invasion of Spain in 711 and had stabilized into a corsair war by the late sixteenth century. The Barbary corsairs were not much different in their tactics and rapaciousness from their contemporaries in Europe. The attacks on North African communities and commerce by European corsairs such as the Knights of St. John of Malta and the Tuscan Knights of San Stefano were of a kind with the raids on European communities and commerce emanating from Barbary. The most important difference in American eyes was that the North Africans enslaved captured Christians, while the Europeans did not. They found the concept of white Americans being enslaved outrageous, even though they were engaged in the slave trade themselves. For their part, the Spanish, French, and Italians reciprocated in kind and enslaved Muslims whenever they captured them.

In the second place, in spite of the popularity of the expression “Millions for defense, not one cent for tribute,” the United States had to buy its way to peace with all the Barbary powers except Morocco. It spent close to a million dollars in 1796 for a peace treaty with Algiers and the ransom of captive seamen, and under that treaty it paid Algiers an annual tribute of \$24,000 until 1812. Peace with Tunis cost \$107,000, and our first peace treaty with Tripoli in 1796 cost \$53,000. We paid Tripoli another \$60,000 in 1805 to

ransom some three hundred prisoners. This followed a protracted effort at naval blockade and bombardment of the town of Tripoli, and the capture of Derna, a provincial capital that was the “Tripoli” of the Marine hymn. These actions contributed to Tripolitanian willingness to settle for less than originally demanded, but did not suffice by themselves to bring about a peace.

It was diplomacy, not force, that eventually resolved our major crises with the Barbary states. Naval force *was* instrumental in imposing a new peace treaty on Algiers in 1815, but that peace was kept intact through diplomacy. There are lessons to be learned from the Barbary experience, but they are not what the commentators seem to think. They are lessons about the utility of force as an adjunct of diplomacy, not as a substitute for it.

On the other hand, the most important single effect of the problems with the North African states was the creation of the American navy. The Americans had hoped to rely on diplomacy and their neutral status as commercial traders to save them the need to pay for a navy, but eventually decided from their experience with Algiers that they must have one if they wanted to trade with the Mediterranean.

Thanks to the protection afforded by British treaties with the North African states, that trade had been very important to the economy of the colonies. Jefferson reported to Congress in 1790 that before the Revolution one-sixth of the wheat and flour and one-fourth of the dried and pickled fish exported by the colonies went to the Mediterranean, and that eighty to one hundred ships manned by about 1,200 seamen were involved in the trade. The value of exports to southern Europe and Africa in 1770 has been estimated at about \$3.5 million, while imports from there were valued at \$1 million. Most of these commodities were carried in American bottoms.

Trade with the Mediterranean had been suspended during the hostilities with Britain, but once peace was signed in 1783 the Americans hoped to resume it. Unfortunately, they no longer enjoyed the protection of British treaties, and all the North African states routinely considered themselves at war with states that did not have a treaty relationship with them. Although the Americans were eventually able to resolve their problem with Algiers diplomatically, they soon felt the need for naval help with Tripoli, and the U.S. Navy has been patrolling Mediterranean waters off and on ever since. Today’s Sixth Fleet is a direct descendant of the first American man-of-war to enter the Mediterranean, the frigate *George Washington* under Captain William Bainbridge in 1800.

When the crisis began, in 1785, the thirteen original states were governing themselves under the Articles of Confederation, a famously dysfunctional arrangement under which the federal government had no power of taxation or regulation of trade. Although the Americans had great promise, they were

weak and poor. They had no navy, and their army numbered only seven hundred men. They had little international experience, and none outside Europe. The Ottoman sultan in Constantinople was not even aware of their existence. They had admirers abroad, but no government prepared to intercede for them seriously with the Barbary powers. This is the story of how they coped on their own. It is a story of perseverance through frustration and problems of communication that would be unthinkable today.

The problems with Algiers have been well described from an American point of view by various writers and historians over the years. In 1847 Charles Sumner of Massachusetts claimed to be the first “to combine in a connected essay the scattered materials with regard to it.”² The bibliography contains an annotated list of other works. They tend to be Americocentric. I have sought to describe more fully than usual the local context in which the events occurred and to explore questions of procedure and tactics that interest a practitioner. While the basic story would be worth retelling even if there were nothing new to add, I have found some new meat to put on the bare-bones narrative of our first effort at negotiations with Algiers, have documented the unhelpful roles of the British and the French, and have assembled in one place the scattered information on the identities and fates of the American captives at Algiers. I have also sought to give a fuller picture than is usually presented of what happened diplomatically with Tripoli and Tunis, an aspect of the story that is normally dwarfed by the naval details.

There is copious documentation of these events in the *American State Papers* for the period, in the splendid *The Emerging Nation: A Documentary History of the Foreign Relations of the United States Under the Articles of Confederation, 1780–1789*, edited by Mary A. Giunta and published by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission in 1996, in the holdings of the U.S. National Archives, and in the admirable six-volume *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers*, published by the U.S. Navy’s Office of Naval Records and Library in 1939, which has become a primary source for writers working in the question.

All of the “scattered materials” that Sumner mentioned have yet to be brought together fully. Indeed, the task of assembling all of the material available in documents and publications is overwhelming, and the constraints of time have made me forgo many tempting detours into details. The result here is a collection of essentials culled from the documents. It is incomplete. There are still points that need to be clarified and questions to be answered.

Describing the scene of action also poses problems. The history of Algeria in this period is not well chronicled. The local population, the Arabs and

Berbers, left few descriptions of their world, and we know very little about their societies. Contemporary descriptions of the country can be found in books listed in the bibliography, but they rely largely on the observations of outsiders—travelers, captives, and consuls—most of whom had limited contact with the local population and limited knowledge of the Arabic, Turkish, and Berber languages, although they may have had some command of the local lingua franca. With no contemporary censuses and few government records, the economic and social data used by writers to date have largely been taken from the estimates of these foreigners and from consular records. Recent research in the archives is shedding some light, and we are now beginning to have more reliable contemporary data about the size of the population and the true state of the economy, but the information is still quite fragmentary. Reconstructing the past from these fragments is an archeological task, the results of which are not fully satisfactory. Too much must be left to imagination and interpretation.

As primary sources for details of the events involving the American prisoners and negotiators in Algiers I have relied largely on their writings and on the consular correspondence found in the British, French, and American archives. These events are well described in detail in H. G. Barnby's *The Prisoners of Algiers*, which draws on both American and British archives. I have leaned heavily on that book as well as on the memoirs of James Leander Cathcart, one of the American prisoners, who rose to be the ruler's chief Christian secretary, and on the writings of Joel Barlow, who secured the prisoners' release in 1796. For Algerian insight I have used mainly the memoirs of Ahmad Sharif al-Zahhar (1781–1872), the naqib al-ashraf, or leader of the prophet Muhammad's descendants, in Algiers. This is the only "contemporary" Arabic text I have found. Some of its accounts must have been based on hearsay or oral tradition, because they were written well after the events described, but it is the nearest thing to an indigenous chronicle for the period. Today's Algerian national archives have so far yielded nothing relevant to the diplomatic story.

These sources have been supplemented by standard works on Algeria listed in the bibliography. Two works are particularly useful—*Sketches of Algiers*, by William Shaler, who was the American consul in Algiers from 1815 to 1828, and *Tunis et Alger au XVIIIe siècle*, written in the period of 1780–1790 by Jean-Michel Venture de Paradis, a French consular official.

I have quoted liberally from original sources in the belief that contemporary accounts are more evocative of the period than summaries or paraphrases written two centuries later. I have restricted the documents in the appendixes to those unlikely to be found in a university library today.

Finally, I have had a good deal of help with this work from a variety of

people, including: Martha Smart of the Connecticut Historical Society, Mary M. Thacher of the Stonington Historical Society, Alice D. Sheriff of the New London County Historical Society, Greg Laing of the Haverhill Public Library, Carolyn Singer of the Haverhill Historical Society, Martha Oaks of the Sargent House Museum in Gloucester, Ellen Nelson of the Cape Ann Historical Association, Bertram Lippincott of the Newport (R.I.) Historical Society, Philippe Henrat of the Archives Nationales in Paris, Bruno Ricard of the Centre des Archives Diplomatiques in Nantes, Daniel Panzac and André Raymond of IREMAM at Aix-en-Provence, H. E. Francesco Mezzalama, a cherished former ambassadorial colleague, Salvatore Bono of the Société Internationale des Historiens de la Méditerranée, Mary Jane Deeb of the Library of Congress, Moussa Saker of Oxford, Richard Arndt, Lutfi Ben Rejeb of Tunis, Nicholas Scheetz of the Lauinger Library at Georgetown University, Milton Gustafson of the National Archives, L. Carl Brown and Erika Gilson of Princeton, Amy Gorelick, Judy Goffman, and Ann Marlowe, the eagle-eyed copyeditor, of the University Press of Florida, Margery Thompson of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, Francis De Tarr, Karin Hård af Segerstad of Stockholm, and others.