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The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World (pp. 102-105)

Christopher Null

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In the wake of September 11, and the subsequent American-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, a number of works, both scholarly and popular, have been produced to attempt to explain the current world situation. One particularly booming field covers the histories of the United States' first military involvement with the Arabic-speaking
Muslim world—the Barbary Wars. However, all works of history are not of equal quality. Despite the few gems to be found scattered among the bookstore shelves, many of these works engage in the most simplistic of analyses and reach for the most tortuous of conclusions. Caveat emptor.

In his book, The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World, Frank Lambert, a Professor of History at Purdue, offers one of the few well-researched and well-written post-9/11 accounts of the Barbary Wars. Lambert opens his work by discussing the current historiography. He notes that many of the available post-9/11 works attempt to draw parallels between the U.S. war on the Barbary pirates and the U.S. war on terror. Furthermore, much of the available literature paints the conflict as either a religious war between Islam and Christianity or as a clash of cultures. Lambert believes all of these approaches are misguided and overlook the fundamental issue at play in this conflict: trade.

Lambert begins with a discussion of the Atlantic world as it existed before 1800. This world, as he describes it, was based on a mercantilist economy in which trade was a zero-sum game. The British and French navies stood as major powers, while the Dutch, Portuguese, Italians, and other European nations were minor players. At the periphery were both the United States and the Barbary Powers.

After winning its independence, the United States sought to secure its position in the Atlantic world through trade, and not through its military. Indeed, in the years following the Revolution, the U.S. lacked any effective naval forces. The Americans believed in freedom of the seas and free trade, and sought agreements that would allow them access. The British and French, however, were unwilling to allow such a system to come into being.

Facing limited access to the European continent, the Americans turned to the Mediterranean. Though they enjoyed lucrative trade at these ports, they soon found themselves under attack from Barbary Corsairs. The Americans first attempted to secure peace through tribute, but when that failed, they turned to war. After a long and costly conflict, the Americans finally obtained victory and free trade throughout the Mediterranean.

Overall, Lambert's discussion is intriguing, though his emphasis
on economic causes for the war ignores certain cultural and religious elements that should be factored into the discussion. While Americans were forced to deal with the Barbary States, why did the U.S. choose its actions, given the range of options it had available? That said, however, this book is a “must-read” for anyone seeking to understand this conflict.

David Smethurst, a contributor to renowned periodicals such as Parenting and Runner’s World, recounts the events of the Barbary Wars in his book, Tripoli: The United States’ First War on Terror. As the title indicates, Smethurst wrote this book with the goal of illustrating the profound similarities between the Tripolitan War of 1801-05, which began when North African privateers initiated economic warfare against U.S. shipping, and the current “War on Terror,” which began when Islamic extremists carried out an indiscriminate suicide attack against civilians. While he does not explicitly draw these parallels, Smethurst’s exceptional narrative leaves the reader with little doubt that these two conflicts are fundamentally analogous.

Smethurst’s main thesis can be easily summarized in a phrase that is often used within the text: “force must be met with force.” Throughout the book, he praises William Eaton and other men of action as leaders with the moral certitude to recognize the need for military force and the courage to follow their convictions. Smethurst upbraids Adams and others who sought diplomatic solutions for the short-sightedness and ineffectual leadership.

The book focuses on Eaton’s plan to overthrow the ruler of Tripoli, Yusuf Karamanli, and replace him with his brother, Hamet, who would be more favorable to the U.S. and its interests. The author heaps praises upon Eaton for his ingenuity. However, as the final chapter, entitled “Betrayed,” indicates, a plan faltered as a result of the ambivalence of Thomas Jefferson, who supported Eaton’s coup before he opposed it. Consequently, Eaton and his men were forced to retreat just when their objective was within reach. As the book closes, the reader witnesses Eaton as an old man, embittered by his “stab in the back” by the American government.

This book suffers from a lack of drama and action. Smethurst could have elaborated his explanations of how ships maneuvered during battle, how corsairs boarded an enemy ship, or how gunners loaded and
fired an eighteenth-century cannon.

Christopher Null