

THE UNITED STATES AND THE BARBARY STATES
1785 - 1801

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B. S., North Georgia College, 1961

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of History

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1974

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
I. INTRODUCTION	1
II. THE FAILURE OF DIPLOMACY	12
FOOTNOTES	35
BIBLIOGRAPHY	41

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Piracy began in the Barbary States at the beginning of the sixteenth century, when Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Moors from Spain. On leaving their homeland, the Moors crossed the strait and settled along the northern coast of Africa. Too weak to oppose the Spanish on the open battlefield, they employed their knowledge of the coast and the sea to retaliate against Spain. Employing a form of guerrilla tactics, the Moors struck the Spanish at their weak points, attacking either unarmed ships or undefended areas near the coast. When the Spanish attempted to remove this nuisance, the Moors allied with the Turkish Corsairs to form the forerunner of the Barbary Pirates.¹

The pirates made their home in the Barbary States which, in the eighteenth century, consisted of Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. This was the part of northern Africa bounded on the east by Egypt, west by the Atlantic, south by the Sahara, and north by the Mediterranean. By their geographic location, the Barbary States dominated Mediterranean shipping, pirating ships of all nations that did not pay ransom or tribute. As one Tripolitan Ambassador stated,

. . . the Barbary States, and Turkey, were the 'sovereigns of the Mediterranean', and would permit no nation to navigate it without a treaty of peace.²

The Corsairs also made frequent raids into the Atlantic, going as far north as the English Channel and west to the West Indies,³ capturing ships of any country not protected by treaty or cannon.

In order to protect their Mediterranean shipping, European nations customarily purchased treaties with the Barbary States. The weaker nations purchased treaties because they did not have the power to destroy the pirates. However, the stronger nations elected to pay tribute and leave the pirates to damage the commerce of other nations. This tactic of reducing competition was a particular favorite of Great Britain, whose aim was to secure a monopoly of the world's carrying trade and commerce. To accomplish this purpose she encouraged the pirates of the Mediterranean by paying them a small tribute to harass the commerce of weaker maritime nations, while leaving British ships unmolested.⁴ Lord Sheffield a member of Parliament summed up the British attitude when, speaking of American trade, he stated,

It is not probable the American States will have a very free trade in the Mediterranean; it will not be to the interest of any of the great maritime powers to protect them there from the Barbary States. If they know their interest, they will not encourage the Americans to be carriers--that the Barbary States are advantageous to the maritime powers is obvious. . . . The Americans cannot protect themselves. . . . They cannot pretend to a Navy.⁵

Reporting on Britain's attitude to R. R. Livingston, Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Benjamin Franklin wrote on July 25, 1783, ". . . I have in London heard it is a maxim among the

merchants, that if there were no Algiers, it would be worth England's while to build one."⁶

American merchants found it difficult to adjust to this British policy, since before the Revolutionary War, Great Britain had protected a substantial amount of American commerce from the pirates. The loss or destruction of the records of many of the custom houses in the early days of the war preclude an exact account of Colonial trade, but as Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson estimated to Congress, before the Revolution,

. . . about one-sixth of the wheat and flour exported from the U.S. and about one-fourth in value of their dried and pickled fish, and some rice, found their best markets in the Mediterranean ports. That commerce loaded outwards, from eighty to one hundred ships, annually, of twenty thousand tons.⁷

Other commodities exported in considerable quantities to Southern Europe and Africa before the Revolution included rum; rice; pine, oak, and cedar lumber; beeswax; and onions. The value of American articles shipped to the Mediterranean in 1770 was estimated at £ 707,000. In the same year, American bottoms transported foreign merchandise to Mediterranean ports worth an estimated £ 6,287.⁸ Colonial imports for 1769 were estimated at £ 228,682 consisting largely of wines, salt, oil, and Moroccan leather.⁹

This was a substantial amount of trade for a young and growing merchant fleet and was expected to grow even more after peace was established. However a new nation, inexperienced in diplomacy and possessing a weak central government, was ill-equipped to deal with the problems of