

# Backward glances

by Rich Carriero

## Barbary Wars

**America's first foray into foreign policy was not a territorial struggle with the British, French or Spanish. Rich Carriero recounts the tale of the Barbary Wars and the US' only run-in with the Ottoman Empire.**

The Barbary Wars were a fascinating saga played out on the high seas, in the deserts of North Africa and plush London drawing rooms. The US vs. Islamists 200 years pre-9/11, a lesson in geopolitical psychology, amazingly colourful characters—pirates, slaves, be-turbaned Ottoman diplomats and two future American Presidents: rarely does history ever get this juicy.

After the fall of the Byzantines, control of the Mediterranean degenerated into a free-for-all between Crusader states, Italian economic powers and the Ottoman Empire. At first the Ottomans, by nature steppe warriors, were not adept seamen but Mehmet the Conqueror willed the Turkish Navy into a formidable power by 1453. In the subsequent centuries Ottoman might overpowered Christian forces in the east while in the west the Spanish began to evict the Moors, sending many an angry Muslim to the seafaring territories of North Africa. One opportunistic pirate, a half-Greek Turk named Oruç, fought back and actually expelled the Spanish from Algiers in 1516. Rather than giving the land back to the Moors, however, Oruç kept it for himself and allied his private fiefdom with the Ottomans, exchanging military aid for a piece of the action. Thus was born the first Barbary State, an Islamic enclave nominally allied with Istanbul and subsisting on booty from European shipping.

For the next 300 years the Barbary pirates wrought devastation on trade, robbing and killing anyone in their path and making their Caribbean counterparts look like a bunch of pussies. They dealt heavily in human trafficking. The Ottoman Empire relied on the enslavement of non-Muslims as a crucial part of its social and economic structure. Slaves filled the Harem. Slaves were Janissaries and civil servants. Hell, even Sinan was a slave. Pirates profited by abducting those on ships at sea and even villagers along the coasts and either selling them to the

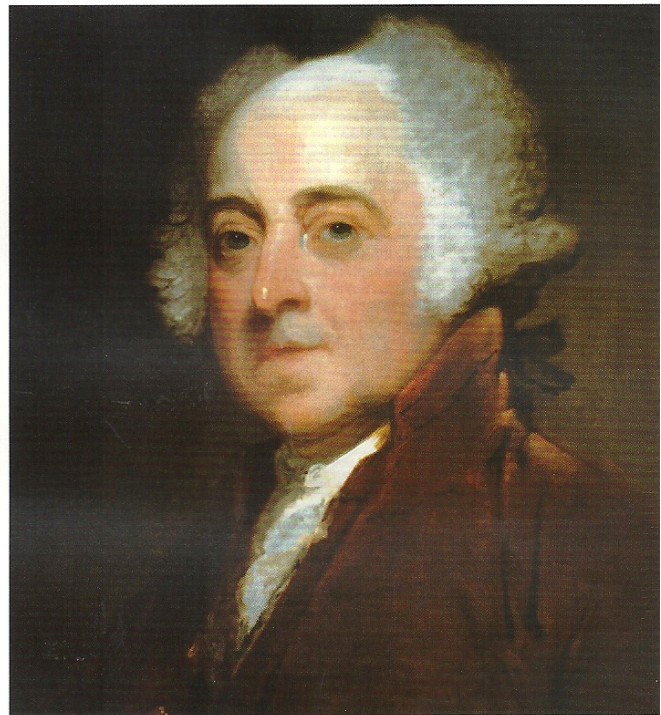
Ottomans or ransoming rich captives back to their families. By the 18th century the economic powers of the age all paid handsome tribute to rulers of the Barbary Coast.

After the Revolution in 1776, American shipping no longer fell under the aegis of British protection and the Barbary pirates responded immediately, seizing three ships by 1786. The United States simply did not have the navy to deal with the problem and so the American government authorized John Adams and Thomas Jefferson—future presidents and the American ambassadors to England and France—to buy off the pirates.

David McCullough's 2001 biography, *John Adams*, describes how Adams procured a meeting in London with the ambassador from Tripoli, Sidi Abdul Rahman Adja, in February 1786. Before getting down to business, however, Adams sampled a little Turkish hospitality. 'Adams and his host settled into large chairs before a great fire, while a pair of factotums stood by at attention. As His Excellency Abdrahaman spoke no English, they got by on scraps of Italian and French. His Excellency wished to know about American tobacco. That grown in Tripoli was far too strong, the American much better, he said, as two immensely long pipes were brought in, ceremoniously filled and lighted.'

Adams recounted the *tête à tête* in a letter to Jefferson; 'It is long since I took a pipe, but [Adams wrote]... with great complacency, [I] placed the bowl upon the carpet... and smoked in awful pomp, reciprocating whiff for whiff... until coffee was brought in. His Excellency took a cup, after I had taken one, and alternately sipped at his coffee and whiffed at his tobacco... and I followed the example with such exactness and solemnity that [one of] the two secretaries... cried out in ecstasy, "Monsieur, vous êtes un Turc!"'

Quickly dispelling the cross-cultural bonding experience, however, the Turkish ambassador proceeded to relay his nation's official policy: the Barbary States were in fact "the sovereigns of the Mediterranean" and America could not hope to be safe without a treaty. Adams rightly feared that such an accord would cost a bundle. Subsequent negotiations between



John Adams

Adams, Jefferson and the ambassador arrived at a price of \$1,000,000 (10% of the American budget).

Over the protests of Jefferson, who reasoned that Barbary demands would only become more oppressive (a foretaste of 1930's appeasement debate), Adams and Congress paid up. Of course the ever-prescient Jefferson was correct; in the years that followed the government paid tribute to one Barbary state only to have another get jealous, take hostages and demand more. In 1799 when George Washington died, the Pasha of Tripoli demanded a gift of \$10,000 in honour of the dead President. By 1801 when he didn't get his gift quickly enough he had the flag in front of the US embassy cut down—a rather overt declaration of war.

This time, however America had a navy and Jefferson was President. He immediately vowed to end the scourge of Barbary piracy, gleaming insight about the mettle and resolve of his foe from his own copy of the Koran (the one used to swear in Keith Ellison as a US congressman in 2006) and heeding the

words of Adbrahman himself, 'It is written in the Koran, that all nations which had not acknowledged the Prophet were sinners, whom it was the right and duty of the faithful to plunder and enslave; and that every mussulman who was slain in this warfare was sure to go to paradise.'

In 1801 Jefferson dispatched the newly minted navy to the Mediterranean, beginning a time-honoured tradition of American meddling in the Middle East. This first encounter, however, was not without setbacks. The USS Philadelphia ran aground and was promptly captured and displayed in Tripoli harbour as a trophy. A young American officer, Stephen Decatur, daringly led a suicide mission to retake the captives and burn the ship. Meanwhile, Commander William Eaton crossed the Egyptian desert at the head of a multinational force and sacked the Tripolitan city of Derna, forcing the pirates to sue for peace. In 1830 the French took Algiers ending the Barbary threat for good and bringing to a close the golden age of piracy.