



BOOK REVIEWS

Past as Prologue

Aaron Mannes

JOSHUA E. London, *Victory in Tripoli: How America's War with the Barbary Pirates Established the U.S. Navy and Shaped a Nation* (Hoboken, NJ: J. W. Wiley and Sons, 2005), 276pp., \$24.95.

Faced with a choice of appeasing hostage-taking Middle Eastern despots or overturning the international order, the United States hems and haws as its prestige wanes—until finally, an outraged American public demands action. The European powers watch carefully, and maneuver to gain their own advantage. After marginal pinprick strikes, American forces mount a major campaign, receive rapid capitulation, and predictably fail to press their advantage.

The year was 1804.

In *Victory in Tripoli*, Joshua London tells the story of the first American Middle East crisis. For centuries, pirates based in the North African states had been extorting money from European governments. Shortly after America's independence, these bandits set their sights on the United States as well. The resulting hostage crises and plunder finally became so severe that the United States was compelled to construct a navy (indeed, the Barbary crisis effectively forced the debate towards those who felt the new nation should have a strong navy) and launch it against the Pasha of Tripoli. But the ensuing naval blockades and limited forays were mere pinpricks, and although the United States enjoyed some tactical successes, the Pasha became



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even more convinced that the United States lacked resolve.

Enter William Eaton, Revolutionary War hero and former U.S. Counsel to Tunis. Eaton proposed that the United States support Ahmed Qaramanli, the Pasha's deposed brother, in re-taking the throne. In late 1804, Eaton traveled to Egypt, recruited Qaramanli and raised a small force, including a single squad of eight U.S. Marines, some mercenaries, and a local band of followers. He quick-marched his tiny army across the desert and stormed Derna, the easternmost outpost of the Pasha of Tripoli's realm, in the spring of 1805. The expedition is commemorated in the famous refrain in the Marine Corps hymn: "... to the shores of Tripoli."

The Pasha, after failing to retake the city, became nervous and entered serious peace talks with the United States, eventually coming to terms of sorts with Washington. The United States, in turn, abandoned Derna, spiriting out its own personnel and the pretender Qaramanli (who died impoverished and exiled).

Victory in Tripoli is a page-turner that moves deftly between Washington machinations and naval maneuvers in the Mediterranean. London lets this terrific story tell itself, writing in a lean, effective style. A bit of explanation about diplomatic protocol at the turn of the 19th century, some decent maps, and perhaps a bit of background on naval warfare in the age of wooden ships (for those of us who don't know a schooner from a sloop) all would have been useful—but these are merely quibbles.

Most writers would have been tempted to play up the parallels with today's events. London, however, for the most part has wisely resisted this impulse, restricting himself to some wary descriptions. But the similarities

between today's troubles with the Middle East and the war with the Barbary pirates are unmistakable: disputes between the diplomats and the military, a perfidious role by the European powers (Britain encouraged Barbary piracy against the Americans because it kept the United States out of the valuable Mediterranean trade routes), and a divisive domestic debate over the U.S. role in the world. As such, the underlying lesson contained in *Victory in Tripoli* is crystal clear: Middle Eastern despots change their behavior when faced with overwhelming force. Precision strikes, soft power, smart sanctions, and carrot and stick approaches are not sufficient.

But London's book is not a policy monograph; it is a work of history. Its great strength is in illuminating our present predicament by showing us the past. London's descriptions of the tendentious and erratic negotiation tactics used by the Barbary chieftains, and of the ubiquitous decay and weakness characterizing North African societies, could have been ripped from today's newspapers. In a chilling harbinger of today's megaterror, London shows us how the Barbary pirates were forthright in citing the Koran to justify their plundering ways as a form of *jihad*. This piracy was not merely a vocation; it was a religious duty.

To be sure, there are important differences between the crisis of today and the war against the Barbary pirates. The pirates were more akin to contemporary international organized crime networks than to the mass-murdering terrorists of today's Middle East. And the United States of 200 years ago did not have the confidence of its own democracy to dream of changing the Middle East. Nonetheless, the perennial issue remains

the same. Two centuries ago, as a diplomat in Tunis, Eaton wrote:

... there is [no] ... friendship with these states, without paving the way with gold or cannon balls; and the proper question is, which method is preferable.

As we again face this critical choice, a look back at the first American crisis in the Middle East has become increasingly valuable. London has done a great service in telling this tale, and telling it well.



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