

Why were the
barbary wars
important?



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When we think of American involvement in the Middle East, we tend to think recent history. This is only natural, as this was the time period in which the United States was a superpower. Superpowers have a global reach, and their influence carries all over the globe. However, even prior to America gaining hegemonic status, we still had a rich history in the Middle East. In fact, one of the most important series of events leading to our development of America as a powerful nation was a result of our actions following attacks by North African pirates.

Now, some may question the importance of a war with a group of pirates off the North African coast. Now, it is true that our enemies in these wars were not powerful, like the empires of Europe. It is important not to overemphasize the importance of any single series of events. There were hundreds of things that contributed to the development of the United States into a powerful nation, and it is arguable how important the Barbary Wars are. Some may argue that the Barbary Wars were merely a short term reaction to a small overseas threat. They say that it doesn't represent a major shift in American policy and the decisions made in that war have been largely inconsequential for the rest of American history.

The major source I am using for this paper is *Power, Faith, and Fantasy* by Michael Oren. Oren is a former professor and is the current Israeli ambassador to the United States. He's an American born Israeli. This might present some biases in his presenting of Middle Eastern events directly involving Israel, but this is not the case with the Barbary Wars. The book is a description of American foreign policy in the Middle East, with a major focus

on the Barbary Wars as one of the determining forces behind the future of American policy in the Middle East.

Before we begin to look at Early America policy in the Middle East, we must first examine the basic forces behind any state seeking to gain influence in a faraway region. It is most often the case that money is the primary motive behind any foreign policy. America's primary interest in the Middle East is oil. Oil is the reason why we care more about the Middle East than say, West Africa. But money is not the only motive that dictates policy. Political advantages are also an important consideration of any state. For example, a significant part of American foreign policy in the Middle East is our alliance with Israel. Our relations with the countries of the region are not only determined behind the financial considerations of Oil, but also by our goal of maintaining a strong state in Israel. These are rules that apply to any country's foreign policy. Just as these rules apply to us today, they also applied to us two hundred years ago.

Therefore, in this paper, I will be seeking the advantages that are underneath the difficult decisions made by countless America statesmen. Before oil was a consideration, why did the United States seek involvement in the Middle East? Were we encouraged by the prospects of Economic Growth in the region? Was it related to our relationships with the European empires? Was it part of our desire to assert ourselves as a nation of the world? What were our reactions when we were attacked by pirates? Well, in this paper, I will consider these possible objectives and inform you why we did what we did, and what this means for us.

As far as I am concerned for the purpose of this paper, the history of the United States of America begins with our independence. Once we defeated the British, it was up to our leaders to grow our economy and determine our foreign policy. Both of those tasks often prove difficult for newly created nations. The British Empire, who we had fought for our independence, had always had a significant role all over the world. Due to Europe's proximity to the Middle East, the history between the two regions even predates the era of colonization. By definition, Americans of this time period were the descendants of former British subjects. The emotions of previous centuries carried themselves over across the Atlantic Ocean and were nested in the minds of American citizens. The history between Europe and the Middle East is one of the most important factors behind our early actions in the Middle East.

During the centuries prior to American Independence, the relationship between Europe and the Middle East was filled with tense relations, and in some cases, war. Both sides often viewed the other as barbarians, which is something that never helps diplomacy. When declaring the crusades, Pope Urban II called Middle Easterners a “despised and base race, which worships demons”. This was a frame of thought shared among many Europeans. This was passed over to America and serves as a basis to the level of ignorance present among Americans.

Also, before looking at U. S. relations with the Middle East, which was a secondary concern of ours, we must look at our primary foreign policy concerns in Europe. The United States fought a war against Great Britain for our independence, making the relationship between us and the most

powerful empire on the face of the Earth somewhat tense. France supported us during that revolution, but since then, we developed issues with the French. The people of France overthrew their government, and the United States issues the Proclamation of Neutrality in 1793. The United States wished to remain neutral, but at the same time, our Merchants sailed over the seas in search of money.

American Merchants were some of the best and most profitable merchants in the world. They traded all over the world, most notably to Europe and the West Indies. However, it isn't well known that in the young America, trade to the Mediterranean nearly equaled trade to the West Indies. Americans traded goods such as timber, tobacco, and sugar in return for delicacies like capers, raisins, and figs. Our traders many a lot of money from this trade for one major reason. At this time, the Mediterranean Sea was nearly unchecked by the Empires of Europe. American traders could trade without being regulated by the European powers.

However, as always, problems arose. As a newly formed and highly indebted nation, America lacked the resources to fund a navy capable of protecting our ships thousands of miles

away. This was not the only issue. Even Thomas Jefferson was wary of constructing a navy, warning against creating a navy that “ Could sink us under them”.

In 1784, Jefferson, while serving as the minister to France, attempted to circulate a plan to fight the Barbary States. The Barbary States didn't just attack American vessels of course; they captured any unprotected ship that

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they felt they could take. With the assistance of Marquis de Lafayette, the French nobleman who helped America in our revolution, Jefferson managed to circulate a plan where the combined navies of Spain, Portugal, Naples, Denmark, Sweden, and France, would have a permanent presence on the coast of North Africa. Some nations expressed interest, but the general reaction was very negative. In fact, the French refused to cooperate at all. All of the European nations preferred to pay tribute rather than fighting the Barbary pirates head on.

America would continue to pay tribute for many years. It was estimated that a navy would cost two million dollars, which was about 20% of the American budget. Congress decided to allot a total of seventy thousand dollars, not for the construction of a navy, but to be given to the Barbary States in tribute.

However, tribute was not only expensive, but it was also a difficult policy to go through with. It was a difficult transaction, so the U. S. congress gave the job to a man named John Lamb. Lamb was a businessman from Connecticut. He wasn't a diplomat, but he had once done business in the region. He was sent to deliver the ransom and collect hostages taken by the State of Algiers. His mission ended as a failure when he failed to secure the release of any hostages and only managed to receive additional demands.

It is important to remember that the Barbary States were not ruled under a single government. Algiers was just one port. Soon after the failure of John Lamb in Algiers, John Adams, then the minister to Britain, met with Abd al-Rahman al-Ajar, a nobleman from Tripoli. For Adams, this meeting actually gave him an interesting perspective; he learned what Abd al-Rahman had to

say. Contrary to what Adams had believed, Abd al-Rahman was an educated man, who spoke Italian, Spanish, and French. Additionally, Abd al-Rahman estimated that it would cost approximately one million dollars to bribe Tripoli, Tunis, Morocco, and Algiers. It was Abd al-Rahman's opinion that the Barbary States were sovereign states, and that American merchants were violating their sovereignty. Adams felt the demands were excessive, but he even remained of the opinion that bribery was the only course of action.

In 1790, Thomas Jefferson was appointed as the secretary of state. Despite the fact that he had initially feared the building of a navy, Jefferson had realized the reality of the situation and changed course, saying that " We ought to begin a naval power, if we mean to carry on our commerce." Jefferson had never been to the Middle East, but as the Secretary of State, his job was to protect American interests overseas. He realized that constructing a powerful navy capable of protecting our merchants was the only way to " carry our commerce".

But even Thomas Jefferson could not convince congress to declare war. Instead, congress provided 140, 000 dollars for the purposes of tribute and ransom. Jefferson was forced to agree to attempt to pay tribute. However, he decided to only send 25, 000 dollars to Algiers, knowing that it would be rejected. This, like previous attempts, failed.

At this point, after defeating the most powerful empire in the world, and already twenty years into existence, the United States was still unable to deal with the threat from Barbary. The United States congress was even unable to come up with a consensus plan for dealing with the pirates. Debate

in congress raged on, with members debating on the right of the Federal Government to go through with this, and the actual ability to build the ships. However, in the end, the fear of being embarrassed by Barbary led the appropriation to pass by a vote of fifty to 39. A total of nearly seven hundred thousand dollars was provided in order to build six frigates. This marked the birth of the American navy as an actual navy. The process of building ships was slow though, and the U. S. still wrestled with the choice between tribute and confrontation.

When Jefferson assumed the office of president in 1801, he was ready for action. He felt that military action was both “ more economical and more honorable”. However, as a man of contradictions, Jefferson’s first actions in office were to cut the budget for the navy and favor a policy of isolation. He still hoped to form an alliance with Europe to fight against Barbary, but the nations of Europe had not waivered one bit since his previous attempts. Meanwhile, the pirates of Tripoli and Tunis looted more ships, the Catherine and the Franklin.

The choice became clear, at least to Jefferson. He moved towards war, but there was an obvious problem. The constitution gives the power to declare war to congress. After previous difficulties in congress, Jefferson was understandably not confident in their ability to declare war on Barbary. He declared a “ police action” as a method of circumnavigating congress and getting what he wanted. While this was happening, Tripoli proceeded to storm the American consulate and cut down the American flag in front. Jefferson soon deployed the Essex, President, Philadelphia, and Enterprise. These ships reached Gibraltar and proceeded to blockade the enemy port of <https://assignbuster.com/why-were-the-barbary-wars-important/>

Tripoli. The American vessels fought a ship called the Tripoli, and won easily. However, the rest of the mission was not quite as successful. The small and quick ships of Tripoli managed to run the blockade. Later missions were similarly unsuccessful, and it was clear that the American fleet was inadequate for the mission required of it. On October 31st, 1803, the one of the greatest military disasters in American history happened. An American ship, named the Philadelphia, got caught in a reef and was stuck. The ship was captured by the forces of Tripoli and the 307 American sailors were left outside the American consulate. The ship was renamed The Gift of Allah. Soon, in 1804, Stephen Decatur led a mission to ignite the Philadelphia. It was successful and America was hailed in Europe and hailed by the Pope.

Also in 1804, an important military operation began, led by William Eaton, who was appointed the agent to the Barbary States. He devised a plan to overthrow the government of Tripoli and strike fear in the hearts of other Barbary leaders. His force consisted of only nine Americans, but ninety Tripolitans, sixty three European mercenaries', and two hundred and fifty Bedouin, a Desert dwelling Arab ethnic group. After fighting disloyal soldiers, hunger, and their enemies, the United States government eventually withdrew their support for this mission.

Jefferson felt this was a victory. He had shown American strength, by nearly overthrowing a North African government, and he had helped establish some level of free trade in the Mediterranean. He also got back the hostages. He had this to say: " an operation ... gallantly conducted by the late consul Eaton" led the rulers of Barbary to " seem generally disposed at present to respect our peace and friendship".

In 1812, the United States became embroiled in the War of 1812 against Great Britain. Once again, we were up against one of the world's premier militaries. The war of 1812 is often remembered for several reasons. The British burned down Washington DC, the United States failed to invade Canada, and the successful defense of Baltimore resulted in the Star Spangled Banner. But there were other results; one of them was interference with ongoing policy in the Middle East. To fight the British Empire, the United States needed to use all of the resources at our disposal. Thanks to the allocation of Funds under Jefferson, the United States Navy consisted of about 50 warships. However, the British Navy was outfitted with over 800 ships. Because the United States was forced to focus our resources on fighting the British, we were forced to recall all of our Frigates from the Mediterranean. There was no end to the war in sight, so President James Madison decided to return to the highly unpopular practice of paying tribute to the Barbary pirates.

The War of 1812 ended with the signing of the Treaty of Ghent in late 1814. Soon after the war ended, American public opinion demanded retribution against the Barbary pirates. After three months, Madison asked for and received a declaration of war. Stephen Decatur was tasked with leading a ten ship squadron, which included powerful ships captured from the British. One of these, the *Guerriere*, met up with Algerian ships. The battle was a decisive American victory. The *Guerriere* took 500 prisoners, with the only seven deaths coming from an accident aboard the ship. On June 28th, 1815, the ten American warships sailed into the harbor of Algiers. The American navy forced Algiers to pay 10, 000 dollars and release American captives.

Soon after, Decatur advanced his forces to the states of Tripoli and Tunis. He demanded that all hostages be released, and that they pay for any damages as a result of their earlier actions. It was with this, that America had won a decisive victory in the Barbary Wars.

This military victory was vitally important in the formation of the United States of America. As a nation, we were threatened, and after countless hardships, we reacted strongly and refused to pay tribute. We financed the beginning of our navy and won a decisive victory against foreign enemies who threatened the security of our overseas interests. The Barbary Wars are a great example of America moving from the militarily weak and indecisive nation we were right after the revolutionary war to a strong and brave nation that took our enemies head on. The victory led to Nationalism in the American homeland and marked the true beginning of America as a country respected by the rest of the world.

Now, I am not attempting to say that the Barbary Wars were the only or most important event leading to our development into a powerful and respected country. After all, we only defeated small states in North Africa without advanced militaries. But it was certainly vastly important because it marked the definition of an American policy that has continued for the last two years. We don't bribe terrorists, which in this case, includes pirates. While the more powerful nations of Europe had taken the easy approach, simply paying tribute to the Barbary States, America stood strong. We fought our enemies head on and one. This was a defining decision in American history. In the last two hundred years, we as a nation have had a rich and important history in the Middle East, from the end of the Barbary Wars to the <https://assignbuster.com/why-were-the-barbary-wars-important/>

Iraq war today. The premises adopted in the Barbary Wars have been adopted as the baseline for our policy in the Middle East then. For good or for bad, we have protected our interests in the Middle East militarily because of that decision by our early leaders to confront the Barbary pirates. Perhaps if we had taken the other course, American History would have turned out much differently.