U.S. Enters the First Barbary War (1801–1805)

> "But let me ask you My Dr Marquis in such an enlightened, in such a liberal age, how is it possible the great maritime powers of Europe should submit to pay an annual tribute to the little piratical States of Barbary. Would to Heaven we had a navy able to reform those enimies to mankind, or crush them into nonexistence."
>
> George Washington to Lafayette, August 15, 1786

What was the relationship between the North African regencies and the Ottoman Empire in the late 18th century?
In the late 18th century, the North African regencies of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli (Libya) were only nominally part of the Ottoman Empire. While the sultans in Istanbul claimed suzerainty and were formally recognized in religious and political forms, these regencies operated with significant autonomy. Geographic distance from the imperial center, coupled with the empire's own internal crises and external threats from European rivals, meant that Ottoman authority in North Africa had greatly weakened.

How did the regencies of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli achieve their de facto independence?
Each regency followed its own path to autonomy. In **Algiers**, authority shifted in the mid-17th century from Istanbul-appointed governors to the local Janissary corps and corsair captains. The Janissaries began appointing their own rulers (deys), whose positions were eventually confirmed by Istanbul. In **Tunis**, the Husaynid dynasty of beys, beginning in 1705, ruled virtually independently; leaders such as Hammuda Bey asserted broad autonomy, though they continued to pay tribute and mint coins in the sultan's name. In **Tripoli**, the Qaramanli dynasty, founded in 1711, maintained quasi-independence for most of the 18th century, with only nominal Ottoman oversight.

What role did privateering play in the regencies' autonomy, and what happened to it by the late 18th century?
Privateering—or corsair activity—was central to the regencies' autonomy. Operating under state-issued "letters of marque" and framed as legitimate warfare under Islamic law, corsairs provided both revenue and naval strength. These operations targeted shipping from Christian powers without treaties, motivated by a blend of religious justification (continuation of holy war) and the desire for plunder and captives. By the late 18th century, however, corsairing was in decline, restricted by increased European naval pressure and changes in global trade. Still, rulers in Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli continued to employ corsairs as instruments of foreign policy.

What was the central dilemma faced by the United States regarding the Barbary States in the decades leading up to 1801?
After independence, U.S. shipping lost the protection of the British Navy and became vulnerable to Barbary capture. Corsairs from Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, and Morocco seized American vessels, demanding ransom and annual payments. The young United States faced a stark choice: pay tribute to the Barbary States to secure its ships and sailors, or use military force to protect commerce and national honor. Policymakers weighed the humiliation and expense of tribute against the heavy costs of naval war.

Who were the main figures in the early debate, and what were their opposing viewpoints?
The two leading figures were Thomas Jefferson and John Adams.

- **Jefferson**, then U.S. minister in Paris, opposed permanent tribute, warning it would invite endless demands. He urged naval construction and the use of force, calling it "more honorable, more effective, and less expensive" in the long term for a trading nation.

- **Adams**, representing the U.S. in London, believed the country was too weak and poor to sustain a war. He argued tribute was more economical, doubting Congress or the public would fund the necessary navy. President Washington's administration generally followed Adams's practical approach, pursuing treaties and ransoms.

How did U.S. policy evolve from the 1780s to 1801, and what event brought the debate to a head?

In the 1780s and 1790s, despite Jefferson's objections, Congress and the Washington and Adams administrations negotiated treaties involving tribute: Morocco (1786), Algiers (1795), Tripoli (1796), and Tunis (1797). The U.S. lacked a strong navy until 1794, and attention was diverted by the Quasi-War with France. By 1800–1801, Yusuf Qaramanli of Tripoli, dissatisfied with his payments compared to Algiers and Tunis, demanded an additional "present" and threatened war. U.S. consul James Cathcart warned these demands were extortion. The crisis peaked just as Jefferson took office in March 1801.

How did President Jefferson respond to Tripoli's declaration of war, and how did he navigate constitutional limits?
In May 1801, Tripoli declared war—symbolized by cutting down the U.S. consulate flagpole. Jefferson sent a naval squadron with defensive orders: protect commerce and, if hostilities had begun, "chastise their insolence." He also moved diplomatically to keep other Barbary States neutral. In his December 1801 Annual Message to Congress, Jefferson stressed that his orders were defensive, citing constitutional limits on presidential war powers. In February 1802, Congress authorized offensive action, allowing U.S. forces to seize Tripolitan ships and goods—effectively sanctioning a limited war.

Did the internal debate end once the war began? What pragmatic considerations emerged?
The debate shifted rather than ended. By 1802, the blockade of Tripoli was proving costly, and in October 1803, the USS *Philadelphia* was captured when it ran aground. Its crew of three hundred was subsequently imprisoned. Jefferson's cabinet noted that Tripoli's raiding was inexpensive for them but costly for the U.S. While still rejecting annual tribute, they agreed that limited, one-time payments could be used if backed by military leverage. This marked a move toward "peace through strength," combining force with pragmatic negotiation.

What was the 'regime change' alternative, and how did it affect the outcome?
William Eaton, U.S. Navy agent, proposed replacing Yusuf Qaramanli with his exiled brother Hamet. In 1805, Eaton led U.S. Marines and mercenaries on an overland march from Egypt to capture Derne, raising the American flag there. The success added leverage but complicated talks. Consul-General Tobias Lear, authorized to make a one-time payment, negotiated peace with Yusuf in June 1805: annual tribute was abolished, but the U.S. paid $60,000 to ransom American prisoners, chiefly from the USS *Philadelphia*. This ended hostilities without achieving Eaton's full objective.

What was the ultimate outcome, and what lessons did the U.S. draw?
The Treaty of Peace and Amity (1805) ended annual tribute to Tripoli—vindicating Jefferson's position—while including a one-time ransom. Lessons included:

- **Self-reliance**: European powers would not join in suppressing Barbary demands.
- **Cost of force**: Naval war upheld honor but was expensive.
- **Pragmatism**: Principles often yielded to cost and expedience.

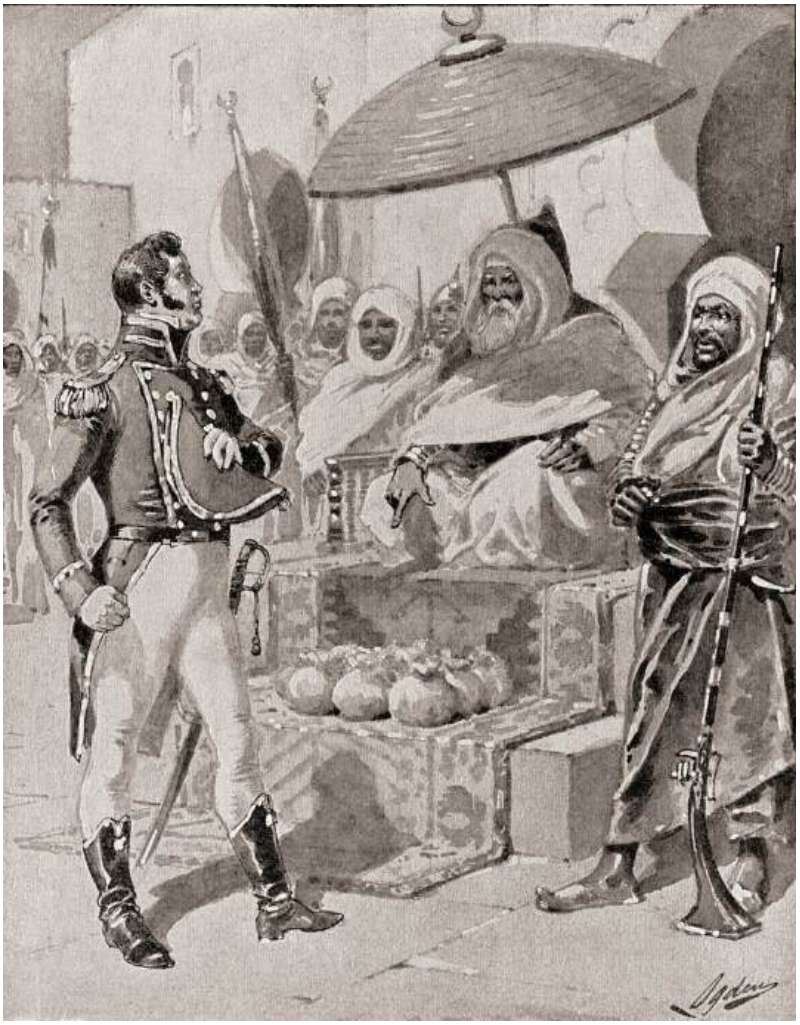
- **Adaptation**: Jefferson's Republicans accepted limited naval force to protect commerce abroad.

How did the end of privateering affect the North African regencies?
As corsairing declined, the regencies faced financial strain and grew vulnerable to European penetration. Economic decline, rising foreign influence, and internal instability paved the way for their eventual colonization in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Timeline

- **1784**: U.S. shipping targeted by Barbary corsairs after losing British protection; Jefferson advocates building a navy over paying tribute.
- **1786**: Jefferson–Adams debate solidifies: Adams favors tribute; Jefferson favors war for "justice, honor, and respect in Europe."
- **1794**: Congress authorizes construction of six warships; policy of appeasement continues.
- **By 1800**: Yusuf Qaramanli demands additional payment, threatens war.
- **March 1801**: Jefferson becomes president, convinced of need for force.
- **May 1801**: Tripoli declares war; U.S. squadron sent with defensive orders.
- **December 8, 1801**: Jefferson reports to Congress, implicitly seeking offensive authority.
- **Early 1802**: Congress authorizes offensive action.
- **April 1802**: Cabinet accepts possibility of one-time payments.
- **October 31, 1803**: USS *Philadelphia* runs aground off Tripoli, crew captured.
- **February 16, 1804**: Lt. Stephen Decatur burns the captured *Philadelphia* in Tripoli harbor; no U.S. casualties.
- **August–September 1804:** Bombardment of Tripoli's defenses; damage inflicted, no capitulation.
- **Late 1804:** William Eaton, U.S. Navy Agent to the Barbary Regencies, promotes plan to restore exiled Hamet Qaramanli to Tripoli's throne with U.S. naval support.
- **March–April 1805:** Eaton leads overland expedition from Egypt with Hamet, a small detachment of U.S. Marines, and mercenaries; captures Derna on April 27.

- **June 1805:** Treaty of Peace and Amity ends annual tribute; $60,000 ransom paid for American captives. Hamet is left without the promised restoration, leading to later controversy.
- **Post-1805**: Jefferson hails treaty as a success in resisting blackmail and demonstrating U.S. naval reach.



Captain William Bainbridge paying tribute to the Dey of Algiers, 1800, by Henry Alexander Ogden

From John Adams to Thomas Jefferson
London, July 3, 1786

Dear Sir,

Yours of the 23rd of June has come to hand, with a copy of Mr. Lamb's letter of the 6th of June from Aranjuez.[1]

There is no intelligence from America of armies marching to take the posts from the English. The news, I suppose, was fabricated against the opening of the Three Per Cents and had the intended effect of depressing the stocks slightly.[2]

Although the frontier posts are important, the war with the Turks is of greater consequence. I lay down a few simple propositions:

1. At this time, we may have peace with them, despite all the intrigues of the English or others to prevent it, for a sum of money.

2. We shall never have peace, even if France, Spain, England, and Holland all use their influence in our favor, without a sum of money.

3. Neither the benevolence of France nor the malevolence of England will materially alter the amount required.

4. The longer the negotiation is delayed, the larger will be the demand.[3]

From these premises, I conclude it is wisest for us to negotiate and pay the necessary sum without delay. Now I desire you, and our noble friend the Marquis, to give me your opinion of these four propositions. Which of them do you deny or doubt? If you admit them all, do you admit the conclusion? Perhaps you will say: fight them, though it should cost us a great sum to carry on the war, and although at the end of it we might still have more money to pay as presents. If this is your sentiment, and you can persuade the Southern States into it, I dare answer that all from Pennsylvania northward would not object. It would be a good occasion to begin a navy.[4]

At present we are sacrificing a million annually to save one gift of £200,000. This is not good economy. We might at this hour have two hundred ships in the Mediterranean, whose freight alone would be worth £200,000, besides its influence on the price of our produce. Our farmers and planters will find the price of their articles sink very low indeed if this peace is not made. The policy of Christendom has made cowards of all their sailors before the standard of Mahomet. It would be heroic and glorious in us to restore courage to ours. I doubt not we could accomplish it, if we should set about it in earnest. But the difficulty of bringing our people to agree upon it has ever discouraged me.[5]

You have seen Mr. Randall before this, no doubt, if he has not fallen sick on the road.[6]

This letter is intended to go by Mr. Fox. The Chevalier de Pinto's courier unfortunately missed a packet, which delayed him and consequently the treaty by a month. The Queen, his mistress, as I wrote you a few days since, has given orders to her squadron cruising in the Straits to protect all vessels belonging to the United States. This is noble and deserves thanks.[7]

Accept the sincerest assurances of esteem and affection from,

Your most obedient servant,

John Adams

Notes

1. John Lamb was the American envoy sent to negotiate with the Barbary States—specifically Algiers—over the release of American captives and the terms for safe passage. His mission was part of early U.S. attempts to secure peace without a navy.

2. "The posts" refers to British-held forts in the Northwest Territory, which Britain refused to evacuate despite the Treaty of Paris (1783). The "Three Per Cents" were British government securities; Adams suspects false news was spread to manipulate the London market.

3. Adams uses "the Turks" as a shorthand for the Ottoman-affiliated rulers of the Barbary States—Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. The "intrigues" refer to European rivalries in the Mediterranean, with Britain rumored to discourage Barbary peace with the U.S. to limit American trade.

4. "The Marquis" is almost certainly Lafayette, who was engaged in transatlantic correspondence on U.S. affairs.

5. The lament over "the policy of Christendom" refers to the long-standing European practice of buying off Barbary corsairs, which Adams believes has eroded maritime courage.

6. Paul Randall was sent to meet with Adams and Jefferson regarding commercial and diplomatic matters, possibly as a messenger from Congress.

7. Luís Pinto de Sousa Coutinho was the Portuguese envoy in London. The "Queen" was Maria I of Portugal, who ordered her navy to protect American shipping in the Strait of Gibraltar—a significant gesture, given Portugal's strategic position and its own conflicts with the Barbary States.

From Thomas Jefferson to John Adams
Paris, July 11, 1786

Dear Sir,

Our instructions relative to the Barbary States having required us to proceed by way of negotiation to obtain their peace, it became our duty to do this to the best of our power.[1] Whatever might be our private opinions, they were to be suppressed, and the line marked out to us was to be followed. It has been so honestly and zealously. It was therefore never material for us to consult together on the best plan of conduct towards these states.

I acknowledge I very early thought it would be best to effect a peace through the medium of war.[2] Though it is a question with which we have nothing to do, yet as you propose some discussion of it I shall trouble you with my reasons. Of the four positions laid down in your letter of the 3rd instant,[3] I agree to the first three, which are in substance that the good offices of our friends cannot procure us a peace without paying its price, that they cannot materially lessen that price, and that paying it, we can have the peace in spite of the intrigues of our enemies. As to the fourth—that the longer the negotiation is delayed the larger will be the demand—this will depend on the intermediate captures: if they are many and rich, the price may be raised; if few and poor, it will be lessened. However, if it is decided that we shall buy a peace, I know no reason for delaying the operation, but should rather think it ought to be hastened.

But I should prefer obtaining it by war:

1. Justice is in favor of this opinion.

2. Honor favors it.

3. It will procure us respect in Europe, and respect is a safeguard to interest.

4. It will arm the federal head with the safest instrument of coercion over delinquent members and prevent them from using less safe means.[4]

I think that so far you go with me. But in the next steps we shall differ.

5. I think it least expensive.

6. Equally effectual.

I ask a fleet of 150 guns, the one half in constant cruise. This fleet, built, manned, and victualled for six months, will cost £450,000 sterling. Its annual expense is £300 sterling a gun, including everything—£45,000 sterling a year. I take British experience for my calculations, though we know from our own that we can do for pounds lawful what costs them pounds sterling. Were we

to charge all this to the Algerine war it would amount to little more than we must pay if we buy peace. But as it is proper that we should establish a small marine force even were we to buy peace, and as that force laid up in dockyards would cost half as much annually as if kept in order for service, we have a right to say that only £22,500 sterling per annum should be charged to the Algerine war.[5]

It will be as effectual. To all the mismanagements of Spain and Portugal urged to show that war against those people is ineffectual, I urge a single fact to prove the contrary where there is any management. About 40 years ago, the Algerines having broken their treaty with France, this court sent Monsieur de Massac with one large and two small frigates; he blockaded the harbor of Algiers for three months, and they subscribed to the terms he dictated.[6] If it be admitted that war, even on the fairest prospects, is still exposed to uncertainties, I weigh against this the greater uncertainty of the duration of a peace bought with money from such a people, from a Dey 80 years old, and by a nation which, on the hypothesis of buying peace, is to have no power on the sea to enforce observance of it.[7]

So far I have gone on the supposition that the whole weight of this war would rest on us. But:

1. Naples will join us—the character of their naval minister (Acton) and his hostility toward Algerine peace terms suggests it.[8]

2. Portugal will join us, provided they remain at war with Algiers.[9]

I suppose a convention could be formed between Portugal, Naples, and the United States, apportioning the war's burden according to respective wealth, with the term of war ending when Algiers subscribed to peace with all three on equal terms. This might be left open to other nations to accede to, and many European powers (except France, England, Holland, and possibly Spain) might eventually join, for the sake of having their peace with the piratical states guaranteed by all. In that case, our proportion of force would not be half my initial estimate.

These are the reasons which have influenced my judgment on this question. I give them to you to show you that I am imposed on by a semblance of reason at least, and not with an expectation of changing your opinion. You have weighed both questions with all their circumstances, yet our conclusions differ. The same facts impress us differently. This is enough to make me suspect an error in my reasoning, though I cannot detect it. It is of no consequence, as I have nothing to say in the decision, and am ready to proceed heartily on any other plan adopted, if my agency should be thought useful.

With respect to the dispositions of the states I am utterly uninformed. I cannot help thinking, however, that on a view of all circumstances, they might be united in either of the plans.

Having written this on receipt of your letter, without knowing of any opportunity of sending it, I know not when it will go; I add nothing therefore on any other subject but assurances of the

sincere esteem and respect with which I am

Dear Sir, your friend and servant,

Th: Jefferson

Notes

1. “Our instructions” refers to Congress’s 1784–1786 directives appointing American commissioners (initially Adams, Franklin, and Jefferson; later Adams and Jefferson) to negotiate treaties with the Barbary powers and secure peace chiefly by diplomacy and payments. “Barbary States” denotes Morocco and the Ottoman regencies of Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli.

2. Jefferson’s phrase “through the medium of war” means using a limited naval war—principally blockade and convoy—to compel a treaty on tolerable terms. In 1786 he floated a plan for a multinational squadron against Algiers.

3. “Your letter of the 3rd instant” is Adams’s letter of July 3, 1786, setting out four propositions about tribute and timing (see above).

4. “Federal head … delinquent members” alludes to the weak center under the Articles of Confederation: Congress depended on state requisitions; a navy would strengthen federal leverage without resorting to coercive state-level measures.

5. Jefferson’s costing—“150 guns,” annual £300 per gun, and the distinction between “pounds lawful” (American state accounting units) and “pounds sterling” (British currency)—relies on British naval estimates; his point is that an American-built force would be cheaper in local terms even if budgeted in sterling.

6. “Monsieur de Massac” is Claude-Louis d’Espinchal, marquis de Massiac (1686–1770), a French admiral and minister. Jefferson’s “about 40 years ago” is imprecise; French coercion of Algiers included bombardments and blockades across the long 1680s–1780s arc, and Jefferson cites a short blockade compelling Algerine concessions.

7. The “Dey 80 years old” is Muhammad V ben Othman (Baba Mohammed ben-Osman), Dey of Algiers from 1766 to 1791—elderly by 1786 and regarded in U.S. correspondence as intransigent.

8. “Acton” is Sir John Francis Edward Acton, the British-born architect of Neapolitan naval policy; as minister he favored firmness toward Algiers, which is why Jefferson expected Naples to join a maritime coalition.

9. Jefferson’s expectation that Portugal would join rested on Lisbon’s active conflict with Algiers in the mid-1780s and Queen Maria I’s June 1786 order that Portuguese cruisers in the Straits protect U.S. vessels—an informal shield for American trade. The 1793 British-brokered truce later removed that shield and exposed U.S. shipping.

From James Madison to James Leander Cathcart[1]
Department of State April 9th. 1803

Sir,

I have received your letter of January 25th. with the other communications under the same cover. Those before received and not acknowledged are of June 3. 11. July 4. 15. Augt. 6. 25. 26. Sepr 3. 4. 18. Octr 8 in the last year.

My last to you was of Augt 22 1802. It was then hoped that you would have been successfully engaged in making peace with Tripoli; for which the crisis was peculiarly favorable.[2] The course of circumstances having deprived us of the advantages of this crisis, to which the tenor of your original instructions was adapted, the President has thought proper to review them with an eye to the change in the state of things, under which, if peace be still unmade, the negotiations for it must now be carried on; and considering that the Bashaw is no longer under the domestic distresses which at one time humbled his pretensions,[3] that all the other nations at war with him have yielded to the customary terms of peace,[4] and that the new terms which the concurrent policy of all civilized nations ought to force on those barbarians, would now be pursued by the United States at very great expence, not only without the co-operation of a single other power, but in opposition to the example of all, and at a period in different respects critical to their affairs,[5] it is thought best that you should not be tied down to a refusal of presents whether to be included in the peace, or to be made from time to time during its continuance, especially as in the latter case the title to the presents will be a motive to its continuance.[6] You are accordingly authorized by the President to admit that the Bashaw shall receive in the first instance including the Consular presents, the sum of 20,000 dollars and at the rate afterwards of 8 or ten thousand dollars a year.[7] If these sums can be reduced you will of course avail yourself of the opportunity. But no enlargement of them towards the example of other nations, will be admissible, especially, if at the date of the negotiations, none of our Citizens should be in captivity.[8] The presents whatever the amount or the purpose of them (except the Consular present, which as usual may consist of Jewelry, Cloth &c) and also the periodical payments must be made in money, and not in stores;[9] the periodical payments are to be biennial rather than annual;[10] and the arrangement of the presents is to form no part of the public Treaty if a private promise and understanding can be substituted.[11]

The Dey of Algiers being inflexible in refusing you as Consul the President has not deemed it proper, especially under present circumstances, to contest a right possessed and occasionally exercised by all Governments;[12] and will therefore without delay send another successor to Mr. OBrien.[13] He reserves to you however, the Consulate at Tunis which was your first object; and which Mr. Eaton has signified his purpose of leaving.[14] Your Commission is herewith enclosed, with a letter from the President to the Bey.[15] It is foreseen that the Bey of Tunis will expect to receive periodical payments in like manner as the Bashaw of Tripoli, and we are prepared to arrange them.[16] He has made several demands of presents from the United States, and last of all

of a Frigate. These have been generally declined, on our part, and we are determined to withhold the latter;[17] but the circumstance itself may be glanced at as our motive for proposing the periodical payments, by which we wish at once to manifest our good will and liberality to the Regency, to give him an interest in preserving peace, and to regulate at a fixed rate what is now so uncertain as its demands.[18] It is believed also that if other circumstances are propitious, it will be eligible to settle the acceptance of them by Tunis at a moderate rate as a preliminary to the negotiation with Tripoli; since it will quiet the former Regency, afford a scale for settling with the latter and anticipate a limit to the proposal the Bey might otherwise make by referring to the precedent set with respect to Tripoli.[19] The sum to be allowed to Tunis is to be payable in Cash and not to exceed the rate of 10,000 dollars per annum, to be paid biennially if it can be so settled.[20] It is expected that the Consular present will not exceed the sum us[u]ally given viz. about 4,000 Dollars.[20]

I am &c.

James Madison.

Notes

1. James Leander Cathcart was a former American captive in Algiers (1785–1796) who became a U.S. diplomatic agent and, by 1803, Madison's intended consul at Tunis after difficulties at Algiers. This letter conveys new negotiating instructions to him in the Tripoli war context.

2. "Crisis … peculiarly favorable." Madison refers to a window in late 1802 when Yusuf Qaramanli's position appeared weakened—financial strain, provisioning problems, and U.S. naval pressure—raising hopes for peace on better terms; by spring 1803, that leverage had ebbed.

3. The "Bashaw" (pasha) here is Yusuf Qaramanli, Tripoli's ruler since 1795. "Domestic distresses" indicates internal fiscal and political pressures that had briefly lowered his demands.

4. Sweden had been at war with Tripoli and signed a separate peace in October 1802, paying to end the conflict and leaving the United States isolated. "Customary terms of peace," the tribute-based arrangements then used by European powers with the Barbary regencies, were lump-sum consular gifts plus periodic payments for safe passage.

5. "Civilized nations … barbarians" is period rhetoric. Madison's practical point: the United States cannot unilaterally impose new norms without allies during a sensitive moment in U.S. affairs.

6. Allowing gifts both to conclude peace and to keep it ("title to the presents") makes the expectation of future payments an incentive to maintain the treaty.

7. Amounts authorized. Initial $20,000 (including consular gifts), and thereafter $8,000–$10,000 per year—limited tribute within capped sums.

8. No upward matching. Cathcart is not to match higher European levels, especially if no Americans are in captivity—a key leverage point.

9. “Money, not stores.” Payments are to be in cash rather than in-kind (cordage, timber, gunpowder, etc.), which had complicated earlier arrangements.

10. Although a per-annum rate is specified, disbursements are to be biennial (every two years), i.e., larger but less frequent payments.

11. If possible, record gifts and periodic payments as a private understanding, not in the published treaty text, lest the payments become widely known.

12. Refusal of exequatur. The Dey of Algiers’ refusal to accept Cathcart is treated as a sovereign prerogative; Madison opts not to contest it.

13. Richard O’Brien, former captive and U.S. consul at Algiers (1796–1803). Another successor would be sent to fill that post.

14. \William Eaton, U.S. consul at Tunis (1799–1803) and later Navy Agent for the Barbary Regencies, had signaled his intention to leave; Madison assigns Cathcart to Tunis.

15. \Enclosure refers to the President’s letter introducing Cathcart to the Bey of Tunis, the ruler of the Tunis Regency.

16. Madison anticipates that Tunis will expect tribute on terms similar to Tripoli and prepares Cathcart to arrange periodic payments there as well.

17. In this era, a frigate was a major warship—typically 28–44 guns, a crew often in the 200–350 range, and high construction and upkeep costs—so the demand was strategically and fiscally unreasonable as a “present.”

18. \Regularized payments would (a) display goodwill, (b) give Tunis a direct stake in peace, and (c) cap unpredictable ad hoc demands.

19. \Concluding a moderate arrangement first with Tunis would create a benchmark for Tripoli, limiting what Yusuf might demand by pointing to the Tunis precedent.

20. Rates and consular gift. Ceiling of $10,000 per annum, paid biennially if possible (i.e., $20,000 every two years). The customary consular present for Tunis is about $4,000, usually in luxury goods (jewelry, fine cloth).

From William Eaton to Commodore Barron
August 21, 1804

Advantages of co-operation with Hamet Bashaw[1]

Apparent advantages of co-operating with the deposed Bashaw of Tripoli against the Usurper —[2]

1º By investing Tripoli in the rear, through the co-operations of Hamet Bashaw, we cut off the enemy's retreat from the country and effectually prevent him receiving supplies from any quarter whatever —[3]

2º Dread of retaliation, when thus invested, will deter the enemy from treating our captives with cruelty.[4]

3º In case of a close investment, the inhabitants of the city, seeing their retreat cut off in the rear, will be very apt to open their gates to the besiegers, to receive their legitimate sovereign, and to surrender the usurper to punishment. We should thus get possession of the enemy's person and suit; and our captives would be restored to us without ransom —[5]

4º Preliminaries of peace are already agreed upon with Hamet Bashaw, on our own terms; &, when definitely concluded, will, most likely be permanent: for, if gratitude on his part be not a sufficient guarantee, we hold his brother and chief admiral, Lisle, as hostages; who may be used to turn the tables upon him whenever he becomes faithless.[6]

5º The experiment will cost us very little, even if it fail of success; nor shall we lose any ground by the failure; we shall then have the enemy in the same position as at present — The success of the measure will save both life and cash: articles well worth economy in a country where there is no redundancy of either. The general as well as particular advantages to the United States equal all they could possibly realise from the most effectual coercion —

6º But to sum up all considerations in one, which ought to weigh down all others, the faith of the United States is pledged to the friendly Bashaw, by letter from Mr Madison to me, by engagements of legitimate Agents of the United States and by conventions of several of our commanders — By adhering to these engagements, we certainly have the advantage of keeping faith and supporting a dignity of character which would impress a high sense of our national perseverance and honor on the minds of the other Barbary regencies, as well as to revive that sentiment among nations whose good opinion is more to be desired —[7]

Disadvantages of acting against Tripoli without Hamet Bashaw

Probable disadvantages of acting without his co-operation —[8]

1º No doubt the enemy's town may be battered to the ground; but he has a retreat in the rear.[9]

2º Our fellow citizens in captivity will most likely be placed on the ramparts of the enemy's batteries and forced not only to expose their breasts to our shot, but to fight against us; while we are compelled to the painful alternative of cutting down the ranks of our own brethren to get access to the enemy.[10]

3º In case of forcing an evacuation of the town, by a bombardment, the enemy having a retreat in the rear, it neither secures to us the release of our captives, nor our own terms of peace: the captives will be carried away to the mountains, and pacification will be delayed or evaded —

4º But should the enemy either find himself reduced to the necessity of yielding to terms; or prevailed on by policy to come to an accommodation, his faith is an insufficient guarantee to the peace: he will violate it as soon as he can do it with probable advantage and security: examples are too numerous to leave the conjecture doubtful.[11]

5º The experiment is sure to cost us some expense of blood; and, most probably, some sacrifice of time and money by the damages our shipping may sustain; which would at this moment be more sensibly felt as we are threatened with war by a nation against whom all our naval resources would be required, and might be more profitably employed — But if defeated in the experiment the enemy gains a decided advantage Whereas even the success of the measure would fall short of the beneficial effects which might be secured at less hazard; as it would leave us in perpetual apprehensions from the enemy's known perfidy; as well as from the possible event of restoration of the legitimate Bashaw, who would thus become a decided enemy —[12]

6º Totally to abandon our engagements with the friendly Bashaw because the indecision, inactivity, or bad generalship of certain of our late commanders may have left him in a dubious situation would stamp the shade of an equivocal mind on our government, which would inflict a wound on the national sensibility and a blemish on our portrait —[13]

Notes

1. The memorandum is by William Eaton, U.S. "Navy Agent for the Barbary Regencies," written for Commodore Samuel Barron and dated August 21, 1804; it lays out the case for employing the deposed Hamet (Ahmad) Qaramanli against his brother Yusuf, then ruler of Tripoli.

2. "Bashaw" is the period spelling of "Pasha," an Ottoman title. "The Usurper" is Yusuf Qaramanli (in power from 1795), who declared war on the United States in 1801; "Hamet" is his elder brother Ahmad (often "Hamet"), deposed and in exile in Egypt.

3. "Investing … in the rear" refers to a landward approach from Cyrenaica, the strategy Eaton later executed by marching with Hamet toward Derna (captured 27 April 1805) to pressure Tripoli from

the east.

4. Eaton assumes hostages would restrain abuse of American captives. During the 1804 campaign, Yusuf threatened the lives of prisoners to deter attacks.

5. “Suit” here means the ruler’s household/retinue. The hope was that a pro-Hamet populace would admit him and deliver Yusuf. (Contemporaneous U.S. planning documents envision such a political collapse following a landward investment.)

6. “Lisle” is Murad Reis (also Peter Lisle/Lyle), a Scottish renegade who converted to Islam and served as Tripoli’s admiral. Eaton’s phrase “we hold … as hostages” reflects the fact that the U.S. squadron captured significant numbers of Tripolitan prisoners in the August–September 1804 actions; whether Murad himself was then in American custody is uncertain in surviving records.

7. Eaton is invoking authority from Secretary of State James Madison and related assurances to cooperate with Hamet. Official notes clarify that Washington authorized Commodore Barron to “enter into an understanding with Hamet,” including limited aid in arms, ammunition, and money—short of a formal treaty. Eaton later charged that the United States “broke faith” when peace was concluded with Yusuf in 1805 without restoring Hamet.

8. “His” = Hamet. Eaton is contrasting operations with and without the claimant’s cooperation.

9. The “retreat in the rear” means withdrawal inland (e.g., toward the Jabal Nafūsa or along the coastal road east), carrying off captives and avoiding decisive terms. U.S. naval documents from 1804–05 repeatedly record fears that prisoners could be removed if Tripoli were pressed only from seaward.

10. Tripolitans used American prisoners to labor on fortifications (the Americans called one work “Fort American”) and issued threats to kill captives if attacked; claims that they were placed directly as human shields appear in contemporary narratives but are unevenly corroborated.

11. Eaton’s skepticism about the durability of “bought” peace reflects long European experience with tribute systems in the Maghreb and the United States’ own 1790s treaties; the 1805 treaty with Tripoli, however, ended hostilities with a ransom but no annual tribute.

12. The “nation” threatening war is not specified; Eaton likely has in mind the worsening Anglo-American maritime crisis (impressment, seizures) that would escalate over the next years, though Spain was also a periodic concern. In any event, he argues U.S. naval resources might be needed elsewhere.

13. In the event, the United States made peace with Yusuf on June 10, 1805: American prisoners were released for a $60,000 ransom and U.S. support for Hamet was withdrawn; Hamet’s family was freed, but he was not restored. The settlement ignited the very “broken faith” debate Eaton anticipated.

From William Eaton to Commodore Barron[1]
September 18, 1804

Is it not more consistent with the dignity and interest of the United States to expend money in reducing than in pacifying an open enemy?[2]

With half the sum authorized, according to Colonel Lear, to be given for a precarious peace with the reigning Bashaw of Tripoli, applied to assist the legitimate sovereign, the usurper may be made prisoner; an honorable and permanent peace secured; and this expense saved to the United States by the reimbursement of Hamet Bashaw —[3]

Mr O'Brien is decidedly in the opinion that this plan may be easily effected.[4] He says the rightful Bashaw has a powerful party in Tripoli:[5] that the usurper has spread the report of his death with a view of baffling their hopes;[6] and that, in order to attack their superstition and their desperation to his cause, he inculcates the idea into his subjects that the Americans are infidels and savages, cannibals and monsters of cruelty —[7] Whereas, were their lawful sovereign shown to them in our fleet,[8] with assurances that we are neither at war with their religion nor their repose; but that we respect both, and seek nothing more than that justice which would restore them to peace and to their proper allegiance,[9] the very soldiery called to the defence of the enemy would desert him and take an opposite part: the Arabs are generally in favor of the friendly Bashaw —[10] This opinion is general where the circumstances are known —[11]

But if fighting alone can secure our honor, I should nevertheless object to taking a vicious horse by the heels when we have a bridle in his mouth and can seize the reins![12] Besides, it is the success of a measure, more than the mode of effecting it, which secures public éclat.[13] Those who should be of a different sentiment may take consolation from the probability, that the resistance which despair would induce the enemy to attempt will be sufficient to all the purposes of glory —[14]

Notes

1. This is a follow-up memorandum by William Eaton to Commodore Samuel Barron, dated September 18, 1804, shifting from operational advantages to the cost-benefit and political logic of backing Hamet (Ahmad) Qaramanli against his brother Yusuf, the reigning Pasha of Tripoli.

2. In period usage, to "reduce" an enemy was to subdue or compel submission by force (e.g., siege/overthrow); to "pacify" was to buy or negotiate a modus vivendi—here, a tribute-based peace.

3. "Colonel Lear" is Tobias Lear, U.S. consul general at Algiers, empowered to negotiate with Yusuf. Eaton argues that half of the sum Lear contemplated for a precarious peace would suffice to restore Hamet—who, Eaton adds, would reimburse U.S. expenses. In practice, reimbursement was speculative: Hamet had no secured revenue base until restored, so the claim functions as advocacy rather than a firm financial plan.

4. Richard O'Brien, former Barbary captive and U.S. consul at Algiers (1796–1803), supports Eaton's scheme; Eaton cites him to bolster the feasibility of regime change.

5. "A powerful party in Tripoli" refers to presumed domestic supporters of Hamet inside the city; Eaton treats this as significant but offers no concrete numbers or factions—an assertion common in his advocacy.

6. The "report of his death" is a rumor attributed to Yusuf to demoralize Hamet's adherents—standard wartime political warfare.

7. The description of Americans as "infidels… cannibals" reflects demonizing propaganda aimed at rallying subjects and discrediting U.S. intentions; Eaton counters by stressing religious neutrality.

8. "Shown to them in our fleet" signals the intended political theater: visibly pairing Hamet with the U.S. squadron off Tripoli to trigger defections and popular recognition.

9. "Proper allegiance" means allegiance to Hamet as the "legitimate" Qaramanli claimant; Eaton predicts defections among garrison troops if Hamet appears under U.S. protection.

10. "The Arabs" here denotes tribal groups—especially in Cyrenaica and the Tripolitanian hinterland—whom Eaton believed inclined toward Hamet; the generalization compresses a more complex tribal landscape.

11. "This opinion is general…" flags that Eaton is reporting a consensus as he perceived it, not presenting independent verification.

12. The horse-handling metaphor contrasts a risky frontal assault ("by the heels") with leveraging Hamet ("bridle… seize the reins"), i.e., using the available proxy to control events.

13. Éclat = public renown or brilliance; Eaton argues outcomes matter more than the particular mode (naval bombardment versus proxy-led restoration).

14. Eaton reassures skeptics of the proxy approach that resistance born of Yusuf's despair would still furnish opportunities for American valor—i.e., prestige does not require a purely naval victory.

Decatur and the Dey of Algiers by W. Mollier