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# Lessons From the Barbary Pirate Wars

By JEFFREY GETTLEMAN

NAIROBI, Kenya — An American skipper in the hands of seafaring rogues. Some of the world's busiest shipping lanes under attack. Tough men from a messy patch of Africa eluding and harassing the world's greatest powers.

Sound familiar? Well, it's not last week's drama on the high seas we're talking about, when Somali pirates attacked an American freighter in the Indian Ocean and took its captain hostage, then made off with him in a lifeboat. We're talking about the Barbary Wars, about 200 years ago, when pirates from the Barbary Coast (today's Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Libya) hijacked European ships with impunity and ransomed back the crews.

"When I first read about the Somali pirates, I almost did a double take and turned to my wife at the breakfast table and said, 'This is déjà vu,' " recalled Frank Lambert, a professor at Purdue who is an expert on the Barbary pirates.

Dr. Lambert explained how those brigands, like today's Somalis, usually kept their hostages alive. It wasn't out of any enlightened sense of humanity. It was simply good business. They only hanged captives from giant hooks or carved them into little pieces if they resisted. The Barbary pirates used small wooden boats, often powered by slaves chained to the oars, to attack larger European ships. They were crude but effective, like today's Somali swashbucklers, who in November commandeered a 1,000-foot-long Saudi oil tanker from a dinghy in the Gulf of Aden, a vital shipping lane at the mouth of the Red Sea.

But the Barbary pirates' bravado became their demise — something the Somalis might keep in mind.

The pirates' way of doing business was described this way at the time: "When they sprang to the deck of an enemy's ship, every sailor held a dagger in each hand and a third in his mouth, which usually struck such terror in the foe that they cried out for quarter at once." The quote is from Thomas Jefferson, then America's ambassador to France, after he and John Adams, the envoy in London, got the description from Tripoli's envoy to Britain in 1786.

And that underscores a key point. The Barbary pirates actually had an ambassador — who met with Jefferson and Adams, no less. The pirates worked for a government. The Barbary rulers commissioned them to rob and pillage and kidnap, and the rulers got a cut. It was all official. And open. It was truly state-sponsored terrorism. And the Western nations' response was to pay "tribute," a fancy word for blackmail.

If a country paid tribute, the 18th-century pirates would leave its ships alone. Today, shipping companies fork over as much as \$100 million in ransoms to the Somali pirates, a strategy that saves their cargoes but also attracts more underemployed Somali fishermen into the hijacking business.

The United States tried to play nice with the Barbary pirates and even inked a few treaties. That language, too, has a striking ring. The Barbary States were Muslim, as is Somalia. And America stressed that this was not about God.

"The United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion," a 1796 treaty reads. "It has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Musselmen," which is how Muslims was spelled back then.

Eventually, though, Americans felt humiliated paying off a bunch of knife-sucking thugs in blousy pants. That's what led to the Barbary Wars, first in 1801 when Jefferson became president, and again in 1815, when James Madison sent the United States Navy to shell the Barbary Coast. The battles became the stuff of legend — "the shores of Tripoli" in the Marine Hymn — and were critical in developing the nation's young Navy.

They also figured early in the naval career of one William Bainbridge, an officer who was sent to pay tribute to the dey of Algiers in 1800, was later captured during the war along with his ship, and went on to become a hero of the War of 1812. Last week, in an irony probably lost on the Somalis, it was a destroyer named after him that the United States Navy sent rushing to help the skipper in the lifeboat.

The Barbary pirates were finally brought to their knees by their encounters with the Americans, and by the French invasion of Algiers in 1830.

Will this happen in Somalia? Last week — even before a French effort to rescue a family in a separate hijacking ended with the death of one hostage — Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton urged the world to "end the scourge of piracy." But Somali piracy is not an isolated problem. It's the latest symptom of what afflicts an utterly failed state — a free-for-all on land that has consumed the country since the central government imploded in 1991. As any warlord there can tell you, the violence is almost always about cash. "We just want the money" is their mantra.

If that sounds like the 1800s, it also invites talk of solving the problem the same way: pound the bravado out of the pirates by taking the battle to them where it hurts most — on shore. But any effort to wipe out Somali pirate dens like Xarardheere or Eyl immediately conjures up the ghost of “Black Hawk Down,” the episode in 1993 when clan militiamen in flip-flops killed 18 American soldiers. Until America can get over that, and until the world can put Somalia together as a nation, another solution suggests itself: just steer clear — way clear, like 500 miles plus — of Somalia’s seas.

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