



Jefferson's War: America's First War on Terror 1801-1805

Joseph Wheelan

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Author Joseph Wheelan has marvelously captured the story of America's war against the Barbary pirates, our first war against terror and the nations that support it. The Barbary pirates, a Muslim enemy from Tripoli, attacked European and American merchant shipping with impunity. Jefferson ordered the U.S. Navy to Tripoli in 1801 to repel "force with force." The Barbary War was also a proving ground for such young officers as William Bainbridge, Stephen Decatur, Isaac Hull, and David Porter –key players in the impending War of 1812 against Great Britain.

Jefferson's War: America's First War on Terror 1801-1805 Details

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From Reader Review Jefferson's War: America's First War on Terror 1801-1805 for online ebook

Dr. Stanley says

A well-written, readable history of important events in the early development of the USA, its struggle against the Barbary pirates to whom European nations had paid tribute for centuries, and the unspeakable cruelty with which these piratical nations treated their captives who were enslaved or sold as slaves if not ransomed. It is particularly enthralling for its description of the outstanding military and personnel management skills of the U. S. Marine's first hero who led a 500+ mile desert march to his objective during which he had to retain the services of mercenary tribes which were always on the verge of murder and desertion; and of how his efforts to defeat the Barbary pirates and to free their American captives without ransom payment or future piracy toward American ships were consistently sabotaged by Washington's former secretary (then a consul general) after Washington's death, this man hoping thereby to gain fame and a fortune. The book reminds us of how weak the USA was at that time, it having a population of just three million, virtually no armed forces, and being heavily in debt to Europe. And also that, unfortunately, government promises may prove unreliable.

KenJustice.com says

I read this book while I was still a warmongering neocon. While this book did introduce me to the engagements with the Barbary pirates, looking back I can see that it was incredibly biased to supporting the so-called modern war on terror. No mention of unintended consequences of foreign entanglements. I can see right through this type of propaganda these days.

Jim says

This is an excellent and eminently readable history of the young United States' conflict with the Barbary states of North Africa in the early 19th century.

The name, "Jefferson's War," is somewhat misleading. It is true that he decided in his first months in office to send American war ships to prevent the Barbary states from taking U.S. merchantmen. He also established the principle that the U.S. would not submit to paying tribute to the Barbary rulers in order to avoid loss of commercial ships. Yet during Jefferson's administrations, the U.S. was never able to effectively stop the harassment of ships or the payment of tribute. Its initial squadron commanders proved too timid, and when a combative commander was finally appointed, he did not have sufficient ships to effectively stop Tripoli, Tunis and Algiers.

It was only in 1815 that the U.S. Navy, under the command of Captain Stephen Decatur, was able to bring Tripoli and her sister states to their knees. And it was only in 1815 that the U.S. succeeded in signing treaties with all three states calling for peace without tributes.

The U.S. naval squadron under Captain Edward Preble laid the groundwork for a generation of great naval commanders, who came to full development in the war of 1812, when they bested the British navy.

Joel Trono-Doerksen says

This was an exceedingly jingoistic, unscholarly, ludicrous retelling of the Barbary Wars. Like many authors writing about this historical event, the author feels the need to compare the Barbary corsairs to Al Qaeda and other terrorist groups. As I have said before, this is a stupid comparison. The only reason is it made is so neoconservative Americans to attack Islam and to claim that "the war with radical Islam has been going on forever." The book itself, filled with typos, is quite antiquated. Its citation format is dated as is its spelling of the word Muslim (spelt Moslem). The names of most of the Muslim characters are spelt how Americans would have spelt them in the 18th century (Mahomet, Hamet, Soliman, Unis). On the second page the author mentions that Europeans called Barbary corsair attacks "The Terror", for which he gives no citation and in all the books and articles and primary sources I have read about this subject, which is a lot, I have never once heard it called "The Terror". The only reason that this made up fact is used is so that once again the connection between the Barbary Wars and the War on Terror can be made. Later on the author extols of the virtues of America while castigating the Barbary states as "medieval, closed, tyrannical and corrupt." He goes on to state that it would "difficult to find more dissimilar nations than the United States and the...Barbary States." This of course is true seeing as how the amount of slaves in all the Barbary states numbered hardly above 10,000 while across the ocean over 600,000 slaves laboured for Americans, one of whom is the name sake of this very book! The author rarely mentions black slavery in America while going on and on about slavery in Barbary. In the third chapter he opens with a quote from the Quran book 9 verse 5, or the verse of the sword, taking the verse totally out of context and without explanation leaving the reader to think, unless he or she possesses a brain, that Islam is a religion of violence. Chapter two, the introduction to the history of the Barbary states, relies heavily on two books, one written in 1901, that simply restate Orientalist ramblings about the East. The newest book the author uses for this chapter was published in 1984. The author's bibliography is tiny and which I would probably add 5 or 6 books that he should have read before writing this one. This of course does not come as a surprise because the author is a journalist by profession and has little to no academic historical training. In a few years I will be more qualified to write a history book than him. All in all, the book does not add anything to the field of study, it does not profess any new ideas like all good history books should. It simply recycles the old stereotypes of Muslims as violent, bloodthirsty, greedy tyrants, adding in a few "ra-ra-ra America is great" jingoisms, and attempts to compare them to todays Muslims. I would recommend this book only to smart people who are capable of seeing that this book is pack of silliness.

Jack says

Very, very, very good. I thoroughly enjoyed this book. This is the first book I have read devoted exclusively to the US/Barbary Wars. By including the dynamics of Europe with the fledgling United States, the author provided some thought provoking concepts of why the Barbary Wars were in the best interests of the European Powers. I find that most authors focus exclusively on the start of the US Navy, instead of adding the European perspective. I would encourage the reader to be familiar with the events of the time period before reading, especially the decline of the French royalty and the beginning of the French Revolution. I highly encourage a reader of early US history to read this one.

Christian D. Orr says

A highly readable and informative account of the First Barbary War. You'll marvel at the heroic exploits of Andrew Sterrett, Edward Preble, Stephen Decatur, William Eaton, and Marine Corps Lt. Presley O'Bannon. You'll shake your head with frustration at the slowness and ineptitude of quasi-warriors and Samuel Barron, and at the political duplicity of Tobias Lear (particularly his abandonment of valuable ally Hamet Karamanli--somewhat reminiscent of our abandonment of our Vietnamese, Montagnard, and Hmong allies nearly two centuries later).

The author's coverage of the incompleteness of America's "victory" at the end of the First Barbary War (which eventually would necessitate a Second such War) reminded me of the unfinished business left over from the Korean War and the first Persian Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm).

Overall, a fine piece of work by Mr. Wheelan.

David Seelye says

This book was more focused on international politics than on the Muslim faith. The connections were minor but we won that war by sending in talented and motivated troops, half measures didn't work and local politics got in the way. The audio reader did sound like someone working for the recruitment office.

David says

Jefferson! Pirates! Buckles being swashed! Seemed worth picking up, and it was.

This is a solid, readable, and engaging history of the US engagement with the Barbary pirates, a fascinating chapter in American history.

The "selling point," that this was similar to the struggle against Al Qaeda, the Taliban or ISIS? It's simply absurd. Neither piracy nor terrorism are particularly pleasant...but they're not the same conceptually. Not at all. But then again, the book was published in 2003, so you needed some kind of hook to sell your book, I suppose.

Wheelan doesn't spend much time forwarding that thesis, thankfully...it's more of a gloss at the opening and conclusion, leaving the reader to move through a remarkable and unique period in American history. I enjoyed it.

3.25.

Jason says

Contrary to what you might expect from reading the title of this book, there's very little Jefferson in here. Which is a good thing because I despise Thomas Jefferson. And, if this book were about him I'd have to go

off on a harangue about what a hypocritical sneaky son-of-a-bitch he is. Instead, I get to ramble about how great pirates and broadsides and 19th century sailing vessels are. Also the word scuttle is the shit.

The primary (and really only) problem with this book is the introduction where the author tries to be all topical and link the Barbary Wars with the Bush administration's "War on Terror". He stops drawing those parallels fairly early on, though, and settles into a rollicking recount of the relationships and battles of the Barbary Wars. This book is much more involving than Six Frigates (a book about the same general topic and time period). If you threw Jefferson's War into a time warp to 1801, I think you could use it as a recruitment tool for the early Navy.

Renn Daniels says

Jefferson warned us through his presidency of the very real threat posed by the radical Islamic Muslim terrorists or extremism in his dealings with the Barbary pirates. Jefferson said that they pose the biggest threat to American Freedoms and our way of life, should we become complacent. Well, here we are, dealing with terrorism and threats posed by the fanaticism, our politicians sold us out. A real eye opener for those who choose to pull their head out of the sand.

Justinian says

Book Review: Jefferson's War: America's First War on Terror 1801-1805
Author = Joseph Wheelan . 2004. 464 Pages

I often quiz and stump Cadets with the following question; "What is the US's first overseas conflict?" Invariably maybe one in a hundred will get it right. Alas, most cannot name the continent or even the era. Yet, this now mostly forgotten conflict is a story which deserves to be told and remembered.

The author of this book does a wonderful job telling the tale without getting the reader bogged down in minutia and detail. The sweep and grandeur is preserved, while the serious scholar can use the bibliography and notes for additional detailed inquiry. The strength of this book is in its readability. The author enhances this by using character sketches of some notable and colorful characters who are part of the truth is stranger than fiction aspect of this tale. Some depth of character is provided on each of the many sides of this conflict as the individuals are encountered.

The weakness in this book is the authors desire to tie the events of the First and Second Barbary Wars to the post 9-11 (2001) struggle against terrorism. He uses comparisons of actions and reactions while omitting contrasts for the most part. It is evident that the author has a bias towards armed action as a solution. This is interesting as much of the book is about the politics behind the conflict and solutions to the conflict. In the end Clausewitz is confirmed as it was a political struggle and a political solution. The author attempts to diminish this by casting the political maneuvering towards a solution dimly or poorly while up playing the military activities and accomplishments ... even as they were done towards those political goals he disparages.

It is easy enough to dismiss the author's attempts to tie the past to the present. I am not sure if he did this because he felt the original story was not captivating enough (and it certainly is captivating enough) or if he is trying to use the past to interject a point in the present and future policy debate. None the less it speaks more to the authors and perhaps many in America feelings. A visceral desire for blood, to inflict pain. In a real sense it is most akin to the concept of honor which lead to so much death in that period on the dueling grounds. This short sighted, thin skinned way of life which sees a slight in a glance, a word, or an inaction which must be avenged. There is a reason it was banned, outlawed and shunned ... but perhaps it lingers in the national psyche just needing to be scratched to be brought back to the fore.

Emotions and reactions aside this book when it dwells on the epic events and actions of the First and Second Barbary Wars is an excellent and informative tome.

Tom Buske says

A very interesting history of the early years of the US Navy as they established themselves in the Mediterranean Sea against the Barbary Pirates.

Bob Price says

Jefferson's War is an insightful look into an over looked period of American History.

In 1800, on the cusp of Thomas Jefferson's election, the United States was still finding itself. Having survived the American Revolution, the upheaval of the establishment of the Constitution, and the early struggles of the 1790s, the United States now faced the difficult task of establishing itself on the world theater. The Barbary War of 1801-1805 enabled the US to do just that.

Wheelan does an excellent job of tracing the history of Jefferson's problems with the Barbary States and his decision to launch the United States on its first foreign war.

What follows is one of the most fascinating stories ever described. The events of the Barbary War would make a wonderful action movie...and the most remarkable aspect is the historicity of the events.

On this stage walk Stephen Decatur and Edward Preble, early heroes of the US Navy. We read of their thrilling adventures at sea, their intrigues and the political backdrop of a world at war.

Wheelan is at his best describing the sea actions of the various sailors and personalities. His vivid imagery puts the reader on the deck of the USS Constitution or in the prison in Tripoli.

This book is important to read some of the current military and political struggles we are currently facing. It is difficult for Americans to remember that this is not the first time we have declared war on Muslim nations. By understanding these earlier wars, we might be able to get a grasp on the current struggles in Afghanistan and Iraq.

I highly recommend this book for its timely subject matter and vividness of writing.

Grant says

While I'm not entirely convinced about the parallels between the Barbary Wars and the GWOT, Wheelan deftly blends military and diplomatic narratives into a readable and cohesive study.

Heather C says

The title of this book caught my attention – did anyone else know that the United States had a war on terror prior to the current one? I sure didn't. I also knew a scant amount about the Barbary pirates, and what I did know was certainly much more current than the early 1800's. While I was initially concerned that the title might just be drawing on current events, this book was quite interesting and informative.

This is a war that I was never taught about in school, and I think I can safely assume that many others haven't either. The United States and many other ocean-faring countries of Europe faced the real threat that the Barbary pirates would attack their ships, take their cargoes, and potentially kill members of their crew or take slaves/prisoners. The United States was the first country to really flex its military muscle when it had enough of paying bribes to these pirate nations. Many of the great military naval heroes of the War of 1812 earned their stripes during these Barbary wars.

This book also read very much like a novel. It felt like an adventure story – you have exotic locales, daring acts of heroism, and anticipation. It was also something where I didn't know what the outcomes would be – something I don't usually get too often. The main focus was not so much on Jefferson, but we do learn about his feelings toward the pirates and his policy actions. I certainly think that this is an event that more people should know about and this book provides great information on the subject while still being an enjoyable read.

The narration of this book was very well done. The narrator was able to incite excitement and anticipation in the listener and led to an enjoyable listening experience.
