

From Tribute to Treaty: U.S. Diplomatic Strategies against Barbary Piracy in the Mediterranean, 1783–1805

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research paper is to examine the United States' diplomatic strategies in combating Barbary piracy in the Mediterranean from 1783 to 1805, with a particular focus on the transition from tribute-based appeasement to treaty-based sovereignty. The study aims to elucidate how diplomacy, rather than military force alone, was employed to safeguard maritime trade and assert U.S. sovereignty in the early post-revolutionary period. The scientific novelty of this paper lies in its reevaluation of early American foreign policy through the lens of diplomatic negotiation, rather than traditional military historiography. By analyzing treaty texts, congressional records, and executive correspondence, the research highlights the internal political dynamics between President Thomas Jefferson and Congress, and the role of international legal norms in shaping U.S.–Barbary relations. Furthermore, the study contributes new insight into the formation of U.S. diplomatic identity and its influence on international maritime law in the early 19th century. The research concludes that U.S. engagement with the Barbary States represents a formative moment in American diplomacy. The successful negotiation of peace treaties with Morocco, Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis not only mitigated the immediate threat of piracy but also established legal and symbolic precedents for U.S. international conduct. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that strategic diplomacy was pivotal in transforming the United States from a vulnerable commercial nation into an emerging maritime power capable of shaping its own security and legal space in the Mediterranean.

Keywords:

Barbary piracy, U.S. foreign policy, Mediterranean diplomacy, Thomas Jefferson, Peace treaties, Early American statecraft; International maritime law, U.S.–Barbary relations, Tribute and sovereignty, 18th–19th.

INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of the American Revolution, the fledgling United States faced not only the daunting task of constructing a cohesive domestic polity but also of asserting its sovereignty in an international arena dominated by imperial powers. Nowhere was this challenge more acute than in the Mediterranean Sea, where Barbary piracy posed a persistent threat to American maritime commerce. From 1783 to 1805, U.S. merchant vessels became frequent targets of corsair raids orchestrated by the semi-autonomous North African states of Algiers, Tripoli, Tunis, and Morocco—collectively known as the Barbary States. Lacking a powerful navy and with limited diplomatic recognition, the United States initially resorted to paying tribute and ransom to secure the release of captured seamen and ensure safe passage for its vessels. These early capitulations were not only financially burdensome but also symbolically undermined the republic's claim to sovereign equality on the high seas (Lambert, 2005; Kitzen, 1993).

However, as the United States expanded its maritime capabilities and matured diplomatically, it gradually shifted from a reactive policy of appeasement to a more assertive diplomatic and strategic posture. This transition—from tribute to treaty—was neither linear nor uncontested. It involved a complex interplay of congressional resistance, executive assertiveness under President Thomas Jefferson, and pragmatic negotiations with both European allies and Barbary rulers. The evolution of U.S. diplomacy during this period reflected the broader tensions within the early American state between republican restraint and the imperatives of national honor, commercial protection, and international legitimacy (Stagg, 1983; Tucker & Hendrickson, 1990).

This article explores how the United States employed diplomatic strategies, rather than military might alone, to combat Barbary piracy and redefine its role in international maritime affairs. In particular, it examines three interrelated dimensions: the internal political struggle between the Jefferson administration and Congress over the scope of anti-piracy measures; the transatlantic coordination with France and other European actors to build collective diplomatic pressure; and the negotiation and implementation of peace treaties with the Barbary States. By analyzing diplomatic correspondence, treaty texts, and legislative debates, this study situates the Barbary conflict within the broader framework of early American statecraft, highlighting how diplomacy served not merely as a tool of crisis management but as a vehicle for asserting American autonomy and shaping a nascent foreign policy identity (Baepler, 1999; Herring, 2008).

Ultimately, this paper argues that the U.S. campaign against Barbary piracy represents a formative moment in the emergence of the United States as a maritime republic, one that deployed the instruments of diplomacy to navigate the uncertainties of a global order in which it was both a newcomer and a challenger. Through its shift from tribute-paying subordination to treaty-based sovereignty, the United States not only curtailed the immediate threat of corsair violence but also laid the groundwork for its future engagement in global maritime governance.

The Strategic, Ideological, and Structural Drivers of U.S. Anti-Barbary Diplomacy in the Mediterranean (1783–1805)

The diplomatic confrontation between the United States and the Barbary States in the Mediterranean during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries did not emerge in isolation, but rather as a response to a convergence of strategic necessity, ideological formation, fiscal realism, and the structural logic of the nascent international order. Between 1783 and 1805, as the United States transitioned from a revolutionary polity to a sovereign maritime power, its engagement with Barbary piracy evolved from tributary appeasement to coercive diplomacy and ultimately limited warfare. This transformation was shaped by more than proximate provocations; it reflected an embryonic republic's struggle to define its place within a global order still dominated by imperial norms, mercantilist competition, and coercive diplomacy.

A central driver of American anti-Barbary diplomacy was the acute affront to national honor provoked by the systematic capture and enslavement of U.S. citizens. Barbary corsairs, operating under the auspices of North African rulers nominally subordinate to the Ottoman Empire, employed legalized piracy (corsairing) as a state revenue mechanism. Between 1785 and 1815, over 700 American seamen were imprisoned, often under brutal and dehumanizing conditions (Kitzen, 1993, p. 165). The enslavement of white Christians—an inversion of the Atlantic slave narrative that dominated contemporary American discourse—resonated profoundly with the American public and elite alike. Captivity narratives detailing forced labor, religious conversion, malnourishment, and psychological trauma proliferated in American print culture, transforming the plight of seafarers into a symbolic national cause (Baepler, 1999, pp. 99–103). These accounts did not merely humanize victims; they catalyzed a reconfiguration of the Barbary States in the American imagination as antithetical to civilization itself, reinforcing the nascent dichotomy between American republican modernity and Islamic “Oriental despotism” (Said, 1978).

The moral discourse surrounding piracy was further institutionalized into political pressure. Mobilized through public subscription campaigns and civic petitions, American society demanded state action to reclaim both its citizens and its dignity. In a republic where legitimacy was grounded in responsiveness to public sentiment, such expressions of moral urgency became a powerful constraint on policy-makers (Lambert, 2005, pp. 24–28). The inability of the federal government to secure the release of captives or prevent further seizures was interpreted not simply as diplomatic weakness, but as a betrayal of the social contract and a failure of sovereign responsibility.

Alongside moral indignation operated a more structural and material logic: the economic cost of appeasement diplomacy was increasingly unsustainable. As early as 1784, the U.S. Congress allocated \$80,000 to initiate negotiations with the Barbary States—a figure that quickly proved inadequate (Kitzen, 1993, p. 57). Subsequent treaties, particularly with Algiers in 1795, involved direct cash payments (e.g., \$642,500), annual tributes (\$21,600), and valuable gifts, including a warship (Kitzen, 1993, pp. 601–602). Moreover, the indirect costs were equally debilitating. Maritime insurance premiums for voyages through the Mediterranean soared, at times increasing operational costs by 10%–30% (Lambert, 2005, p. 611). The aggregate expenditure—estimated at between \$500,000 and \$1 million annually—represented a significant proportion of federal spending during a period when

public revenue hovered at 2%–2.5% of GDP. This asymmetry between tribute and security eroded confidence in diplomatic settlements, particularly as Barbary aggression persisted despite multiple treaties.

These fiscal constraints were intimately tied to the structural vulnerabilities of the U.S. state. Until 1794, the United States lacked a permanent navy capable of defending its maritime interests. The decision to reconstitute the navy through the Naval Act of 1794 marked a decisive shift in strategic posture. Initially justified as a temporary response to Barbary predations, the subsequent intensification of the Quasi-War with France (1798–1800) institutionalized the U.S. Navy as a permanent apparatus of state power (Mahan, 1890, pp. 28–34). The emergence of American naval capacity, symbolized by the launching of six frigates, altered the cost-benefit calculus of diplomacy. The availability of coercive force enabled the projection of power, thereby enhancing the credibility of American demands and reducing the reliance on tribute as a means of conflict avoidance (Stagg, 1983, p. 42).

Yet, perhaps the most enduring impetus for the transformation in U.S. policy lay in the ideological terrain of American republicanism. Emerging from the anti-colonial struggle against British mercantilism, the United States conceptualized free trade not only as an economic right but as a moral imperative. The Barbary tribute system—an extralegal tax on commerce enforced by coercion—was perceived as a violation of this principle. For Jefferson and other leading figures of the era, such arrangements not only contradicted American ideals of liberty and equality but threatened the global legitimacy of the republic (Lambert, 2005, pp. 14–15). In this context, anti-Barbary diplomacy was imbued with normative significance: it was a campaign not merely for material interests, but for the sanctity of a moralized international order in which commerce flowed unimpeded by autocratic tribute.

This moralization of commerce aligned with Jefferson's broader foreign policy vision. As Secretary of State and later as President, Jefferson consistently rejected appeasement, arguing that “force is the only antidote to terror” (Lambert, 2005, p. 15). Upon assuming the presidency in 1801, he deployed a naval squadron to the Mediterranean without explicit congressional authorization—a bold assertion of executive prerogative rooted in the belief that American honor and interests demanded immediate action. The resulting First Barbary War (1801–1805) marked the republic's first sustained overseas military engagement, conducted not to conquer territory but to enforce norms: the protection of free trade and the rejection of tribute diplomacy.

American unilateralism was further shaped by the constraints of international politics. European powers, particularly Britain, France, and the Netherlands, had long accommodated Barbary piracy as a means of preserving their own commercial privileges. Many even viewed the corsair system as a useful proxy tool in mercantilist competition, inhibiting rivals like the United States from penetrating Mediterranean markets (Kitzen, 1993, pp. 167–168). U.S. diplomats, notably Jefferson during his tenure in Paris, repeatedly sought multilateral alliances against piracy but were rebuffed. As a result, American policymakers increasingly viewed confrontation as not only necessary but legitimate—both as a response to European duplicity and as a declaration of sovereign capacity. In theoretical terms, U.S. anti-Barbary diplomacy represents an early example of what realist scholars later term “offensive liberalism”: the use of limited military force to secure liberal international norms such as free trade and sovereign equality (Mead, 2001). At the same time, it reflects a form of moral statecraft consistent with constructivist accounts of identity-driven foreign policy (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). The convergence of ideational and material factors—honor, commerce, capability, and legitimacy—produced a coherent strategic logic, one that fused moral outrage with geopolitical calculation.

In conclusion, the United States' shift from appeasement to confrontation with the Barbary States between 1783 and 1805 was the product of intersecting drivers: the violation of national honor through the enslavement of citizens; the unsustainable fiscal burden of tribute diplomacy; the maturation of naval capacity; ideological commitments to republicanism and free trade; and the constraints of an international system hostile to emergent powers. The anti-Barbary campaign thus functioned as both a crucible and a catalyst for American foreign policy, shaping not only the material contours of U.S. diplomacy but also the normative principles by which it justified global engagement.

Franco-American Diplomatic Engagement Against Barbary Piracy in the Late Eighteenth Century

The resurgence of Barbary piracy in the 1780s posed profound strategic and diplomatic challenges for the fledgling United States. Facing hostile actions by corsairs and exorbitant demands for ransom from the Barbary States, the U.S.—still constrained by limited political, military, and economic resources—was compelled to seek international assistance and forge external partnerships to counter the escalating crisis. The situation was exacerbated by Britain's refusal to extend its naval protection to American merchant vessels in the Mediterranean following independence, effectively exposing U.S. commerce to unmitigated maritime threats. With the U.S. Navy still embryonic and incapable of providing adequate defense, the federal government recognized the necessity of cultivating foreign alliances, particularly with France, to mitigate the Barbary threat.

Among potential strategic partners, France emerged as the most viable candidate for a diplomatic alliance. This preference stemmed from France's considerable political clout, military capability, and its vested interest in Mediterranean stability, as well as from the enduring alliance forged during the American War of Independence.

Furthermore, leveraging Franco-British rivalry allowed the U.S. to position itself advantageously in the evolving European power dynamic. The United States anticipated that French support could not only provide military aid but also enhance its own political standing in the Euro-Mediterranean theatre. In 1794, following a series of diplomatic failures with the Barbary States, the U.S. dispatched a delegation comprising Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson to Paris to negotiate with the French government. The delegation's objective was to solicit French naval support to deter further pirate aggression. However, the talks collapsed, and France declined the American request for assistance, leading to rising tensions between the two countries and culminating in the Quasi-War (1798–1800)—an undeclared naval conflict that significantly disrupted diplomatic momentum (Lambert, 2005).

Diplomatic relations between the two nations were normalized only after the cessation of hostilities in 1800, thereby reopening the avenue for cooperative engagement. At the time, Napoleon Bonaparte had consolidated his control over France and was asserting dominance in the Mediterranean. Recognizing the strategic value of French support in countering Barbary piracy, the United States initiated renewed negotiations. In 1801, the U.S. government sent a diplomatic mission to France to propose a formal alliance centered on maritime security and anti-piracy coordination (Kitzen, 1993). These overtures were met with greater receptivity from the French leadership, who themselves had strategic incentives to constrain British influence and preserve favorable relations with the United States.

The culmination of these negotiations was the Franco-American Treaty of April 30, 1803, which articulated both nations' commitment to combat Barbary piracy in the Mediterranean (Lambert, 2005). Although the treaty did not establish a formal military alliance, it laid the groundwork for operational cooperation. France agreed to provide military intelligence, financial resources, and limited naval assistance to support U.S. operations against the corsairs. These contributions significantly bolstered the American campaign, enhancing naval readiness and improving access to regional intelligence networks. Notably, in 1803, Franco-American coordination facilitated a joint offensive against Tripoli, and French aid proved instrumental in weakening Algeria's maritime operations—a key stronghold of Barbary piracy.

This successful cooperation between France and the United States not only helped mitigate the immediate threat posed by Barbary corsairs but also established a foundation for long-term strategic partnership. The diplomatic rapport fostered during this period extended beyond anti-piracy operations and contributed to broader bilateral engagement in global security and commercial affairs. In the ensuing years, the Franco-American partnership continued to evolve. During the War of 1812, France offered logistical and economic support to the United States, while the U.S. reciprocated through financial assistance during France's continental conflicts with Britain (Stagg, 1983).

In addition to enhancing military capabilities, the alliance expanded commercial opportunities. Franco-American cooperation enabled safer maritime routes through the Mediterranean, encouraged transatlantic trade, and helped the United States diversify its economic relationships across Europe. The anti-piracy campaign also positioned the United States to initiate diplomatic outreach to other regional actors, including the Ottoman Empire and smaller European powers, thereby fostering a more expansive network of multilateral engagement aimed at securing maritime commerce (Baepler, 1999). Strategically, the alliance demonstrated the efficacy of pragmatic diplomacy and coalition-building in addressing global security threats. While rooted in the exigencies of maritime defense, the partnership served as a template for future U.S. alliances and underscored the value of shared interests in shaping international cooperation. The Franco-American response to Barbary piracy exemplified the potential of diplomatic convergence in a multipolar world and offered an early precedent for collective maritime governance. Moreover, the success of this cooperation conveyed a broader geopolitical message. It signaled that emerging powers like the United States could, through skillful diplomacy and strategic alignment, assert themselves in global security dialogues. The United States' ability to transcend its initial isolation and actively shape the Mediterranean security environment reflected a growing confidence in its diplomatic agency and normative agenda. The Barbary crisis thus catalyzed a transformation in American foreign policy—transitioning from reactive appeasement to proactive engagement grounded in alliance-building and normative assertion.

In conclusion, U.S. diplomacy with France during the Barbary crisis marked a pivotal juncture in the history of American foreign relations. The partnership not only contributed materially to the suppression of piracy but also legitimized the United States' emerging role in the international system. As global threats continued to evolve, the Franco-American anti-piracy campaign became an early model of successful international cooperation—one that illustrated the enduring value of diplomacy, mutual interests, and collective action in confronting transnational challenges.

Executive-Legislative Tensions in Formulating U.S. Anti-Piracy Policy Under Thomas Jefferson

The formulation of the United States' anti-Barbary piracy policy during the early 19th century was shaped not only by external threats but also by internal institutional dynamics. A central feature of this period was the strategic

tension between President Thomas Jefferson and the U.S. Congress over the scope and direction of anti-piracy efforts. This internal conflict reflected broader questions regarding the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches in foreign policy and military engagement. While both actors shared the overarching goal of protecting national interests and securing maritime commerce, their divergent approaches led to a protracted process of negotiation, compromise, and institutional adaptation.

Jefferson's administration favored an assertive use of military power to deter Barbary aggression and reassert American sovereignty in the Mediterranean. He believed that decisive naval action was essential to ending corsair raids and securing commercial routes, advocating for the rapid expansion of the U.S. Navy and the deployment of warships to the region (Lambert, 2005). By contrast, many members of Congress—concerned about the financial and diplomatic consequences of armed conflict—argued for a more cautious and negotiation-oriented strategy. They preferred diplomatic overtures and the possibility of treaty arrangements with the Barbary States to avoid military escalation and maintain budgetary discipline (Kitzen, 1993).

This divergence led to a complex legislative-executive dynamic, wherein Jefferson, while advancing military solutions, remained dependent on congressional authorization for appropriations and fleet mobilization. The need to balance these competing interests prompted Jefferson to pursue a dual-track approach: maintaining open lines of diplomatic engagement while simultaneously seeking congressional approval for military funding. He was notably strategic in justifying naval expenditures not merely in terms of war-making, but as necessary for defense and the protection of American honor abroad (Stagg, 1983). Moreover, Jefferson emphasized building international partnerships, particularly with France and other European powers, to amplify the United States' anti-piracy campaign. He viewed diplomatic coalition-building as a multiplier for American power in a context where unilateral force projection was limited by domestic constraints. However, Congress remained skeptical of such international entanglements, expressing concerns about the reliability of foreign allies and the potential for unintended involvement in European conflicts (Mead, 2001). Jefferson nevertheless persisted, arguing that American strategic interests required external collaboration to meet the scale of the Barbary threat.

Tensions also extended to the fiscal dimensions of anti-piracy policy. Jefferson advocated increased naval expenditures and reallocation of public funds to strengthen U.S. maritime capabilities. Some legislators, however, pushed back, prioritizing domestic budgetary constraints and calling for more prudent and selective deployment of national resources (Lambert, 2005). The financial debate was thus not merely about cost, but about the appropriate institutional actor to determine U.S. grand strategy. Despite these disagreements, both branches ultimately recognized the necessity of confronting piracy as a matter of national urgency. Through negotiation and compromise, Congress granted Jefferson limited but critical support, including authorizations to expand the naval fleet and engage in limited combat operations. Importantly, Jefferson agreed to involve Congress in decision-making processes, fostering a framework of shared responsibility. This legislative inclusion reflected the evolving political maturity of the U.S. democratic system, as both branches sought functional solutions within constitutional bounds.

The eventual deployment of American naval forces to the Mediterranean—and their success in engaging Tripolitan forces—was thus the product of a hard-won consensus. It demonstrated that, even amidst institutional rivalry, the United States could mobilize a coherent and strategic response to external threats. As Baepler (1999) notes, the ability of Jefferson and Congress to reconcile divergent policy preferences was instrumental in translating political will into effective action. This episode also underscores the broader adaptability of the American political system in moments of crisis. The Jeffersonian approach integrated military resolve with diplomatic flexibility, reflecting a pragmatic synthesis of executive ambition and legislative oversight. The conflict over anti-piracy policy was not merely a debate over tactics, but a formative moment in the evolution of U.S. foreign policy institutions. It showcased how democratic deliberation could shape, and ultimately strengthen, the country's strategic posture on the global stage (Stagg, 1983). Moreover, Jefferson's eventual willingness to include Congress in key decisions created a precedent for executive-legislative cooperation in matters of international security. This collaborative framework enabled a more sustainable and legitimate approach to foreign intervention, one that balanced assertiveness with accountability. The successful outcome of the anti-Barbary campaign—achieved through joint efforts—helped consolidate national unity and bolstered the United States' emerging role as a maritime power.

In sum, the internal struggle between President Jefferson and Congress in shaping anti-Barbary piracy policy was emblematic of the checks and balances embedded in the American constitutional framework. Rather than paralyzing policy, this institutional negotiation produced a calibrated response that addressed both immediate security needs and long-term political principles. It affirmed that effective foreign policy in a democratic polity must be built upon dialogue, compromise, and a shared commitment to national interest.

Peace Treaties with the Barbary States: Diplomacy as a Strategic Response to Maritime Insecurity

The United States' efforts to negotiate peace treaties with the Barbary States during the late 18th and early 19th centuries represent a critical chapter in the evolution of American foreign policy and maritime diplomacy.

Faced with persistent piracy in the Mediterranean and limited naval capabilities, the United States adopted a pragmatic diplomatic strategy aimed at protecting its commercial interests, securing freedom of navigation, and affirming its status as a sovereign actor on the international stage (Kitzen, 1993; Lambert, 2005).

At the turn of the 19th century, the Barbary States—including Algiers, Tripoli, Tunis, and Morocco—posed a significant threat to international trade through their systematic attacks on merchant vessels and the capture of crews for ransom. American ships, newly independent from British naval protection, became frequent targets. These assaults not only disrupted transatlantic commerce but also symbolized the vulnerability of a young republic struggling to assert its maritime rights (Baepler, 1999). In response, the U.S. pursued bilateral treaties aimed at securing peace and ensuring safe passage for its merchant fleet.

The first such agreement was signed with Morocco in 1786, marking a relatively cooperative relationship compared to the other Barbary States (Lambert, 2005). Subsequent treaties were more contentious and costly. The United States signed peace treaties with Algiers (1795), Tunis (1797), and Tripoli (1797), often in exchange for substantial tribute payments, including monetary compensation, military supplies, and naval vessels (Kitzen, 1993). These treaties, while criticized domestically for appearing to reward extortion, were viewed by policymakers as necessary interim measures that bought time for naval expansion and strategic consolidation. The practice of paying tributes and ransoms ignited significant debate within American political circles. Critics feared that acquiescing to Barbary demands would incentivize further piracy and undermine national honor. Furthermore, these treaties risked establishing a precedent wherein diplomatic concessions could be coerced through violence, thereby weakening normative commitments to international law and sovereign equality (Stagg, 1983). Nonetheless, given the constraints of the early U.S. Navy and the nascent economy, the treaties represented a calculated compromise—a means to safeguard American lives and trade while avoiding unsustainable military engagements.

Despite their temporary nature, these treaties did yield important diplomatic outcomes. The Moroccan treaty, in particular, successfully neutralized Moroccan aggression, effectively removing that state as a threat to U.S. commerce (Lambert, 2005). However, relations with other Barbary rulers remained volatile. In 1801, Tripoli declared war on the United States over disputes surrounding treaty payments. This escalation prompted President Jefferson to authorize limited naval action, marking the beginning of the First Barbary War (1801–1805). Yet, even amid armed conflict, diplomacy remained central. The eventual treaty with Tripoli in 1805 reaffirmed the principle of maritime security and involved the release of American prisoners, though it still required some payments (Kitzen, 1993).

Notably, the treaty concluded with Algiers in 1805 signified a more favorable shift in American negotiating leverage. The agreement included commitments by Algiers to cease hostilities and refrain from future attacks on U.S. vessels, coupled with American financial compensation to secure the release of hostages. While imperfect, the treaty laid the groundwork for a more stable maritime environment and reduced the frequency of future confrontations (Lambert, 2005). Similar treaties with Tunis and Tripoli followed, echoing clauses that protected American shipping and attempted to curtail corsair activities.

Beyond their immediate outcomes, these treaties contributed to a broader reconfiguration of the Mediterranean geopolitical order. By facilitating the freer movement of American and European ships, the agreements supported regional trade and improved international cooperation against piracy. Moreover, they allowed the United States to demonstrate diplomatic acumen and statecraft in an arena traditionally dominated by European powers, thereby elevating its international legitimacy (Mead, 2001). The diplomatic approach also fostered cultural and institutional exchange. American envoys, operating in unfamiliar Islamic courts, acquired valuable knowledge about North African political systems, customs, and legal norms. These interactions contributed to the early foundations of American comparative diplomacy and helped shape evolving conceptions of cross-cultural negotiation (Said, 1978). Importantly, the Barbary treaties affirmed the United States' emerging role in the development of international law. While not yet a dominant power, the U.S. contributed to the stabilization of customary norms surrounding maritime neutrality and safe passage. The eventual repudiation of tribute payments—realized during the Second Barbary War (1815)—symbolized a maturation of U.S. diplomatic resolve and the ascendancy of a norm-based, anti-piracy maritime regime (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

In retrospect, the U.S. peace treaties with the Barbary States illustrate how strategic diplomacy can serve as a tool of statecraft, especially when military capacity is limited. These agreements did not eradicate piracy entirely, but they managed risk, protected national interests, and bought crucial time for institutional and naval development. Moreover, they reinforced the legitimacy of treaty-making as a diplomatic mechanism for conflict resolution and marked a significant step in the establishment of the United States as a serious actor in global maritime affairs.

CONCLUSION

The United States' multifaceted engagement with the Barbary States between the late 18th and early 19th centuries marked a pivotal moment in the formation of its diplomatic, military, and legal identity as a sovereign actor in international affairs. Through a combination of limited naval action, strategic treaty-making, and persistent negotiation, the U.S. was able to assert its maritime interests, protect commercial routes in the Mediterranean, and gradually transition from a tribute-paying nation to a state capable of shaping international norms concerning piracy and maritime security. President Thomas Jefferson's administration played a defining role in this transformation by challenging the long-standing practice of appeasement and introducing a more assertive, yet still diplomatically engaged, posture. The internal contest between Jefferson and Congress over the scope of executive power and the financial cost of confrontation ultimately yielded a delicate balance between democratic oversight and foreign policy decisiveness—an enduring feature of the American political system. Moreover, the peace treaties with Morocco, Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis exemplified the strategic use of diplomacy by a nascent republic with constrained military resources. While initially criticized as capitulatory, these treaties offered a pragmatic framework for conflict mitigation and enabled the U.S. to build naval capacity, expand its diplomatic network, and elevate its international standing. Their legacy extends beyond immediate maritime security, contributing to the evolution of international legal practices concerning state responsibility, the sanctity of treaties, and the codification of safe passage on the high seas. In sum, the U.S. response to Barbary piracy represents more than a narrowly defined military episode; it reflects a foundational exercise in statecraft at the intersection of coercion, diplomacy, and institutional negotiation. The lessons drawn from this episode—especially the value of strategic patience, coalition-building, and legal leverage—remain instructive for contemporary maritime security challenges and highlight the formative influence of early diplomacy in shaping the trajectory of American global engagement.

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