



From Barbary Pirates to Proto-Terrorists: The Post-9/11 Reframing of Corsairing in American Historical Memory

Des pirates barbaresques aux proto-terroristes : la reconfiguration post-11 septembre de la course maritime dans la mémoire historique américaine

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Abstract

This article examines the post-9/11 American reinterpretation of Barbary corsairs as proto-terrorists and argues that this shift reflects the political demands of the War on Terror rather than historical continuity. While nineteenth-century U.S. encounters with the North African regencies were shaped by commercial disputes, diplomatic negotiations, and evolving conceptions of maritime sovereignty, post-2001 political and popular discourse selectively retrojects the category of "terrorism" onto these early encounters. This reframing obscures the legal and structural similarities between Barbary corsairing which is in reality a systematic, state-sanctioned maritime strategy and European privateering, while amplifying cultural and religious differences to construct a timeless "Muslim threat." This study attempts to demonstrate how encounters with Barbary have been

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instrumentalized to legitimize and justify the past two decades military interventions and immigration restrictions. The article concludes by exploring the consequences of this historical distortion for both scholarly understanding and public policy.

- ✓ *American reinterpretation;*
- ✓ *Political and popular discourse;*

1. Introduction

Within weeks of the September 11 attacks, the Barbary Wars were mobilized as historical precedent for the War on Terror. Richard Leiby's October 15, 2001 Washington Post article, "Terrorists by Another Name: The Barbary Pirates," exemplifies this early discursive formation, explicitly projecting contemporary terrorism categories onto early nineteenth-century maritime conflict to frame America's "first confrontation with Islamic terrorism" (Leiby 2001). This journalistic intervention was neither isolated nor ephemeral. Legal scholars such as Robert F. Turner (2003) subsequently developed analogous arguments in constitutional debates over executive war powers, while President George W. Bush's September 20, 2001 address to Congress invoked the "shores of Tripoli" to position current military operations within a continuous civilizational struggle (Rielly 2008). The pattern extended into institutional memory, with the National Museum of the Marine Corps (opened 2006) featuring exhibits that explicitly linked Barbary corsairs to modern terrorist organizations (Davis 2011), thereby enshrining the analogy within official historical narrative and popular consciousness.

American political discourse rapidly coalesced around a narrative framework that positioned the United States as engaged in a civilizational struggle against Islamic terrorism. This framing, articulated by legal scholars, politicians, journalists, and even some historians, constructs a direct genealogical link between early American conflicts with the North African regencies and contemporary military engagements in the Middle East and North Africa.

The reinterpretation of Barbary corsairs as proto-terrorists represents a significant departure from eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century American understandings and the historiographical consensus that prevailed before 2001. Prior scholarship consistently characterized the Barbary conflicts as commercial and diplomatic disputes embedded within the complex maritime legal framework of the early modern Mediterranean (Parker, 2004; Allison, 1995). The corsairs operated under state sanction, observed recognized rules of warfare, and engaged in systematic ransom negotiations. These were practices that aligned them more closely with European privateers than with non-state actors employing violence for political purposes (Jamieson, 2012).

This article traces the transformation of Barbary corsairs from state-sanctioned maritime raiders into “terrorists” in American historical memory, examining both the mechanisms of this reframing and its consequences. The analysis proceeds in four movements. First, I establish the historical context of Barbary corsairing within early modern Mediterranean political economy, demonstrating its structural and legal similarities to European privateering. Second, I examine how early American diplomats, politicians, and captives themselves understood these encounters, revealing a far more nuanced and pragmatic approach than later mythologies suggest. Third, I analyze the post-9/11 reconstruction of this history, identifying the specific rhetorical strategies employed to transform commercial raiders into religious terrorists. Finally, I consider the implications of this historical distortion for both scholarly practice and contemporary policy debates; to then conclude with reflections on the ethical stakes of historical memory.

This article employs comparative textual-historical analysis across the documentary record of American-Barbary relations (1785-1815) and the discursive construction of those relations in post-2001 political and popular texts. The historical archive consists of diplomatic correspondence (including the Papers of Thomas Jefferson and National Archives consular records), congressional debates, treaty negotiations, and published captivity narratives. The contemporary archive was assembled through targeted collection of newspaper articles, legal scholarship, political speeches, and popular histories that explicitly invoke the Barbary Wars as precedents for the War on Terror. Analysis proceeds by juxtaposing these corpora identifying clear patterns of systematic erasure: the removal of diplomatic context, the suppression of parallels with European privateering, and the retroactive imposition of terrorism as an analytical category where no such concept existed. This comparative framework reveals not merely historical inaccuracy but the mechanisms of instrumentalization; how selective quotation, anachronistic terminology, and asymmetric comparison transform commercial maritime raiding into civilizational conflict.

The significance lies in bridging a critical scholarly gap. While a considerable number of scholars have thoroughly documented the commercial and legal realities of Barbary corsairing (Parker 2004; Peskin 2004, 2009; Belabdelouahab-Fernini 2015; Maameri 2008; Tablit 2015; Farber 2012, 2014;), and while political scientists have noted the post-9/11 proliferation of historical analogies (Rielly 2008; Fishbein 2001), the number of studies which systematically examined how the contemporary “proto-terrorism” narrative was constructed through specific textual practices or traced its consequences for legal interpretation and public policy is still underwhelming. This article demonstrates that the reframing depends on verifiable discursive moves. By making these moves visible, the analysis restores the structural complexity of early modern maritime warfare and challenges the naturalization of contemporary counterterrorism frameworks as transhistorical truths.

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The stakes of this analysis extend beyond purely historiographical concerns. The “Barbary terrorism” narrative has been deployed to justify specific policy positions regarding military intervention, immigration restriction, and the treatment of Muslim-majority nations. By demonstrating the historical inaccuracy of this framing, this article aims to denaturalize what has become a dominant common-sense understanding, opening space for more historically grounded approaches to contemporary challenges.

2. The Historical Reality of Corsairing: State Power, Legal Frameworks, and Mediterranean Context

2.1 The Barbary Regencies: State-Sanctioned Maritime Strategy

To understand the fundamental mischaracterization inherent in labeling Barbary corsairs as terrorists, we must first establish the actual nature of corsairing as practiced by the North African regencies of Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, and Morocco during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Far from representing anarchic or non-state violence, corsairing constituted a central element of these states’ economic and political strategies, operating within recognized international frameworks and subject to diplomatic regulation (Maameri, 2008).

The Barbary regencies occupied a distinctive position within the Ottoman imperial system. While nominally under Ottoman sovereignty, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli functioned as quasi-autonomous political entities, governed by *deys* or *beys* who maintained complex relationships with both Istanbul and the European powers (Belabdelouahab-Fernini, 2015). Morocco, though never part of the Ottoman Empire, pursued similar corsairing policies under the Alaouite dynasty. These states derived substantial revenue from corsairing activities, with captured ships, cargo, and ransomed captives contributing significantly to state treasuries (Benguetaf, 2016).

Critically, Barbary corsairing was legally indistinguishable from European privateering in its essential features. Both practices involved state authorization of private vessels to capture enemy shipping during wartime, with prizes divided between the state and the corsair crew according to established formulas (Panzac, 2004). Both operated under formal legal frameworks: European privateers carried letters of marque; Barbary corsairs operated under authorization from their respective rulers. Both observed—albeit imperfectly—rules regarding the treatment of captives, with systematic ransom mechanisms developed in both the European and North African contexts (Davis, 2001).

The structural parallels extended to the composition and organization of corsairing enterprises. European renegades frequently commanded Barbary corsair vessels, bringing technical expertise in navigation and gunnery (Wolf, 1979). Dutch, English, and French converts to Islam rose to positions

of considerable authority within the corsairing apparatus, with figures like the Dutch renegade Jan Janszoon (known as Murat Reis) commanding entire corsair fleets in the early seventeenth century (Tinniswood, 2010). This multinational, multi-religious character of Barbary corsairing complicates simplistic civilizational narratives that position it as an inherently Islamic practice directed against Christendom.

The maritime legal framework of the period recognized corsairing as a legitimate form of warfare, subject to the laws of nations. Grotius, Vattel, and other theorists of international law acknowledged the right of states to authorize privateering during wartime, establishing principles that governed capture, prize adjudication, and the treatment of prisoners (Kurtz, 2003). While abuses certainly occurred—on all sides—the existence of legal frameworks and diplomatic mechanisms for addressing violations distinguished corsairing from extralegal violence.

The economic logic of corsairing likewise mirrored European practices. Both Barbary and European corsairs targeted merchant shipping to disrupt enemy commerce, capture valuable cargo, and obtain captives for ransom. The ransoming of captives represented a highly systematized economic activity, with established rates, intermediaries, and diplomatic protocols governing the process (Peskin, 2009). Religious orders like the Trinitarians and Mercedarians specialized in captive redemption, negotiating directly with North African authorities according to recognized procedures. The captivity experience, while undoubtedly harsh, followed predictable patterns, with captives often employed in public works, assigned to private households, or held in prisons (*bagnios*) awaiting ransom (Friedman, 1980).

The diplomatic framework surrounding corsairing further underscores its status as state-sanctioned activity subject to international regulation. The Barbary regencies negotiated formal treaties with European powers and, eventually, the United States, establishing terms of peace, commerce, and tribute payment (Tablit, 2015). These treaties followed standard diplomatic forms, specified mutual obligations, and created mechanisms for resolving disputes. When conflicts arose, they were addressed through diplomatic channels, with consuls, ambassadors, and special envoys negotiating on behalf of their respective governments (Nichols, 1950).

The tribute system that developed between European powers and the Barbary regencies has often been mischaracterized as extortion or protection money paid to pirates. Yet this framing ignores the reality that tribute payments represented a common feature of early modern international relations, employed by European powers in their dealings with one another and with non-European states. The alternative to tribute—maintaining a permanent naval presence in the Mediterranean sufficient to protect merchant shipping—proved economically unfeasible for most states (Bailey, 1980). Tribute thus represented a pragmatic accommodation to Mediterranean political realities, not a capitulation to terrorism.

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Understanding this context proves essential for evaluating post-9/11 claims about Barbary corsairs as proto-terrorists. Terrorism, as conventionally defined, involves non-state actors employing violence against civilian targets to achieve political objectives through the creation of fear (Fishbein, 2001). Barbary corsairs, by contrast, operated under state authority, targeted enemy merchant vessels (not civilians per se) according to recognized rules of warfare, and pursued economic rather than primarily political or ideological objectives. The attempted equation of these phenomena requires systematic erasure of the legal, structural, and economic features that actually characterized Barbary corsairing.

2.2 The Comparative Erasure: Barbary Corsairing and European Privateering

The analytical separation of Barbary corsairing from European privateering represents one of the most consequential distortions in post-9/11 historical narratives. This separation depends on emphasizing religious and cultural differences while minimizing or ignoring structural and functional similarities. A careful comparative analysis reveals that Barbary corsairing and European privateering constituted variant forms of the same basic institution: state-authorized maritime raiding for economic and strategic purposes.

European privateering possessed ancient roots, with medieval European powers routinely authorizing private vessels to attack enemy shipping during wartime. The institution became increasingly systematized during the early modern period, with elaborate legal frameworks developed to regulate privateering operations (Jamieson, 2012). Letters of marque issued by monarchs or their representatives authorized specific vessels to capture enemy ships and cargo, with prizes adjudicated in admiralty courts according to established procedures. Prize money was divided between the state, the vessel's owners, and the crew according to predetermined formulas.

The scale of European privateering dwarfed Barbary corsairing. During the Anglo-Spanish conflicts of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, English privateers captured hundreds of Spanish ships, with figures like Francis Drake achieving national hero status through what was, from the Spanish perspective, state-sponsored piracy (Woodhead, 1999). The French *corso* during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries involved thousands of vessels and captured enemy shipping worth millions of livres (Panzac, 2004). Dutch privateering against Spanish and Portuguese shipping in the Atlantic and Indian Ocean enabled the Dutch Republic's rise as a maritime power.

The treatment of captives provides an instructive point of comparison. European privateering generated substantial numbers of captives, who were typically held for ransom or exchanged through cartel agreements. The ransoming of captives represented standard practice in early modern European warfare, with elaborate protocols developed for setting ransom amounts based on rank, negotiating payment terms, and securing releases (Davis, 2001). These practices closely resembled those

employed in Barbary captivity, with religious orders, commercial intermediaries, and diplomatic representatives facilitating ransoms.

The legal frameworks governing European privateering closely paralleled those regulating Barbary corsairing. Both required state authorization, both involved formal prize procedures, both observed (in principle if not always in practice) rules regarding treatment of captives, and both operated within diplomatic frameworks that allowed for negotiation, treaty-making, and dispute resolution. The main difference lay not in legal structure but in the identity and geography of the authorizing states.

The multi-religious and multinational character of both European and Barbary corsairing complicates any attempt to frame these as civilizational conflicts. European renegades—Protestants and Catholics who converted to Islam—commanded substantial portions of Barbary corsair fleets, particularly in the seventeenth century. Dutch, English, and Italian converts brought technical expertise in navigation, gunnery, and ship design, enabling North African corsairs to operate more effectively in Atlantic waters (Tinniswood, 2010). This technology transfer, while concerning to European powers, demonstrated that corsairing transcended simple religious categories.

Similarly, European privateering forces frequently included non-Christian sailors and officers. Sephardic Jewish merchants financed privateering ventures, Muslim and Hindu sailors served on European privateering vessels in Asian waters, and enslaved Africans comprised significant portions of Caribbean privateering crews. The religious diversity within both corsairing traditions suggests that religious identity, while certainly salient, never actually determined participation in these economic and military enterprises.

The diplomatic frameworks surrounding corsairing and privateering likewise demonstrate functional equivalence. European powers negotiated treaties specifying conditions under which privateering would be suspended, established procedures for adjudicating disputed captures, and created diplomatic mechanisms for resolving conflicts arising from privateering operations. The Barbary regencies engaged in identical practices, negotiating treaties with European powers and the United States that regulated corsairing, established tribute or protection payments, and created diplomatic channels for dispute resolution (Benguetaf, 2016).

The economic functions of corsairing and privateering further underscore their fundamental similarity. Both served to disrupt enemy commerce, capture valuable cargo and ships, generate revenue for state treasuries and private investors, and provide employment for maritime populations during wartime. The line between legitimate privateering and piracy remained contested and ambiguous, with authorities routinely disagreeing about whether particular actions fell within authorized parameters (Klarer, 2019).

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The eventual decline of both institutions followed parallel trajectories driven by similar factors. European privateering gradually diminished during the nineteenth century as states developed professional navies capable of protecting merchant shipping, as the economic benefits of privateering declined relative to its costs, and as evolving norms of warfare increasingly rejected privateering as illegitimate (Panzac, 2004). Barbary corsairing declined for comparable reasons, with the French conquest of Algiers in 1830 marking the definitive end of North African corsairing as a significant phenomenon.

The asymmetric treatment of European privateering and Barbary corsairing in contemporary discourse reveals the civilizational agenda underlying post-9/11 reframings. When English privateers captured Spanish ships, this appears in popular history as heroic resistance to tyranny or adventurous maritime commerce raiding. Francis Drake receives celebration as a sea dog and national hero, not condemnation as a terrorist. Yet when Algerian corsairs captured American ships, engaging in functionally identical behavior under comparable legal authorization, this becomes reframed as proto-terrorism, with corsairs characterized as religious fanatics rather than state agents pursuing economic objectives.

This double standard cannot be explained by differences in the practices themselves, which were structurally similar. Instead, it reflects the post-9/11 imperative to construct a transhistorical Muslim threat to Western civilization, positioning contemporary conflicts as merely the latest iteration of an ancient struggle. The systematic erasure of European privateering from popular historical consciousness enables this construction, preventing the comparative analysis that would reveal the fundamental similarities between corsairing traditions.

3. American Encounters with Barbary: Diplomacy, Commerce, and Captivity in the Early Republic

3.1 Commercial Vulnerability and Strategic Debates

American engagement with the Barbary regencies began not as a civilizational conflict but as a commercial and diplomatic challenge facing a newly independent nation seeking to establish its place in Atlantic trade networks. The transformation from British colonial merchants protected by the Royal Navy to citizens of an independent republic exposed to Mediterranean corsairing forced American policymakers to confront fundamental questions about national power, diplomatic strategy, and the costs of maritime commerce (Peskin, 2004).

During the colonial period, American merchant vessels had enjoyed British naval protection and the benefits of treaties negotiated by London with the Barbary powers. Independence severed these protections, rendering American shipping vulnerable to corsair attacks. The first captures of American

vessels by Algerian corsairs occurred in 1785, with the ships *Maria* and *Dauphin* seized and their crews taken captive (Wilson, 1982). These captures sparked extensive debate within American political circles about appropriate responses, revealing deep divisions over foreign policy strategy that would persist throughout the Federalist era.

The diplomatic correspondence of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams during their service as ministers to France and Great Britain illuminates the pragmatic, non-ideological character of early American engagement with Barbary. Jefferson, despite later mythology portraying him as an uncompromising hawk against Barbary “piracy,” initially advocated for tribute payments as economically preferable to war (Sofka, 1997). In a 1786 letter to John Jay, Jefferson calculated that annual tribute to all four Barbary states would cost approximately \$160,000, while constructing and maintaining a navy sufficient to protect American commerce would require substantially greater expenditure (Boyd, 1953, vol. 7).

Jefferson’s subsequent shift toward advocating military action against Barbary derived not from any sudden revelation about the nature of Islam or terrorism, but from the calculated assessment that a small naval force could achieve American objectives at lower long-term cost than continued tribute payments (Bowman, 1956). This shift reflected evolving strategic calculations, not civilizational antipathy. Jefferson’s extensive correspondence reveals a leader engaged in pragmatic cost-benefit analysis, not religious warfare.

The congressional debates surrounding American policy toward Barbary similarly demonstrate the commercial and strategic—rather than civilizational—framing that prevailed. The Naval Act of 1794, which authorized construction of six frigates, passed as a direct response to Algerian captures of American ships and the perceived inadequacy of tribute-based approaches (Crackel, 1982). Congressional supporters emphasized the economic costs of tribute and lost commerce, the humiliation of American captives, and the need to establish American naval power and commercial credibility (Tablit, 2015). Religious or civilizational rhetoric appeared only marginally in these debates, overshadowed by practical concerns about commerce, revenue, and national reputation.

3.2 Diplomatic Pragmatism and Treaty Making

The treaty negotiations between the United States and the Barbary regencies further illustrate the conventional diplomatic character of these relationships. The 1795 Treaty of Algiers, negotiated by Joel Barlow with Swedish mediation, followed standard diplomatic forms and established reciprocal obligations (Belabdelouahab-Fernini, 2015). The treaty specified tribute amounts, guaranteed protection for American shipping, established procedures for resolving disputes, and created mechanisms for consular representation. Similar treaties with Tunis (1797) and Tripoli (1796) followed comparable patterns (Benguetaf, 2016).

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The financial terms of these treaties deserve particular attention, as they have been frequently mischaracterized in post-9/11 discourse as ransom or protection money extorted by terrorists. The 1795 Algiers treaty required an initial payment of approximately \$642,500 plus annual tribute of \$21,600 in naval stores (Farber, 2014). While substantial, these sums represented less than the estimated costs of maintaining naval forces adequate to protect American Mediterranean commerce. Moreover, the treaty established formal diplomatic relations, with the United States opening a consulate in Algiers and exchanging ambassadors—hardly the relationship one maintains with terrorists.

The tributes themselves merit reconsideration. Farber's research demonstrates that payments to Algiers functioned partly as forced loans, with the *Dey* of Algiers effectively becoming an involuntary investor in American state-building (Farber, 2012). The complex financial arrangements involved shipping American goods to Algiers, with delays and complications that strained but did not rupture diplomatic relations. This financial entanglement hardly resembles terrorist extortion; it more closely approximates the often-fraught commercial relationships between early modern states.

The process of treaty-making followed entirely conventional diplomatic forms. Joel Barlow's negotiation of the 1795 Algiers treaty, conducted with Swedish mediation, involved standard diplomatic protocols, careful negotiation of specific treaty provisions, and formal ratification processes (Belabdelouahab-Fernini, 2015). The resulting treaty established reciprocal obligations, created mechanisms for dispute resolution, and specified conditions under which the treaty could be modified or terminated—all characteristic features of international treaties between sovereign states.

The financial dimensions of American-Barbary relations further complicate simplistic narratives. Farber believes that the 1795 treaty with Algiers created complex financial entanglements, with American payments to Algiers functioning partly as forced loans and the *Dey* of Algiers becoming an involuntary investor in American state-building (Farber, 2012). The delays, complications, and renegotiations surrounding tribute payments created ongoing diplomatic friction but also established relationships of mutual financial dependence that constrained both parties.

3.3 Captivity Narratives and Cultural Representation

The captivity narratives produced by Americans held in Barbary provide another crucial window into contemporary understandings of these encounters. Scholars have extensively analyzed these texts for their role in shaping American national identity and public opinion regarding Barbary (Dzurec, 2019). Yet careful reading reveals significant complexity in how captives themselves characterized their experiences and captors. While narratives certainly employed Orientalist tropes

and emphasized the suffering of Christian captives under Muslim rule, they also acknowledged the systematic, state-organized nature of captivity and ransom (Sayre, 2010).

James Leander Cathcart, who spent eleven years in Algerian captivity and eventually served as American consul to Tripoli, provides a particularly illuminating case. Cathcart's letters and journal entries reveal an individual who learned Arabic, developed relationships with Algerian officials, and gained sophisticated understanding of North African political dynamics (Parker, 2004). His writings, while clearly advocating for American captives' release, do not portray Algerians as irrational fanatics but as rational actors pursuing state interests through established diplomatic and economic channels.

The role of captivity narratives in shaping American national identity receives substantial attention in pre-9/11 scholarship, with historians examining how representations of Barbary captivity contributed to defining American citizenship, masculinity, and racial identity (Rojas, 2003; Crane, 2015). This scholarship demonstrates the constructed nature of American identity in opposition to an orientalized Muslim "other," revealing how Barbary captivity narratives served nation-building functions in the early republic. Post-9/11 appropriations of these narratives, however, naturalize what earlier scholarship revealed as historical constructions, treating the civilizational conflict framework as objective historical reality rather than as a product of specific cultural and political projects.

3.4 The Barbary Wars as a Conventional Conflict

The First Barbary War (1801-1805) itself, often portrayed as America's righteous resistance to terrorist demands, emerges from the archival record as a more ambiguous affair driven largely by commercial disputes and concerns about national prestige. The *casus belli*—Tripoli's demand for increased tribute and declaration of war when the United States refused—fit entirely within the diplomatic norms of the period (Kitzen, 1996). The Pasha of Tripoli's actions reflected his assessment that the United States was paying substantially more to Algiers and sought parity of treatment. When rebuffed, he exercised the recognized right of a sovereign to declare war.

The conduct of the war likewise followed conventional patterns rather than counterterrorism operations. Naval blockades, prisoner exchanges, diplomatic negotiations, and the eventual peace treaty all proceeded according to established rules of warfare and diplomacy (Garrity, 2007). The most celebrated American action—the burning of the captured frigate *Philadelphia* by Stephen Decatur—represented a standard naval operation, not a counterterrorist strike. The peace treaty signed in 1805 required a final American ransom payment for captured sailors but eliminated annual tribute, representing a negotiated compromise rather than unconditional victory (Benguetaf, 2016).

The Second Barbary War of 1815, occurring after the War of 1812, involved American naval squadrons coercing Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli into renouncing tribute and releasing American

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captives without ransom. This outcome reflected not American moral righteousness but rather the changed balance of naval power in the Mediterranean following the Napoleonic Wars and the weakening of Ottoman authority over the North African regencies (Maameri, 2008). The treaties signed under this compulsion established new diplomatic relationships based on equality rather than tribute—a transformation enabled by power projection, not counterterrorism.

Throughout this entire period, from 1785 to 1815, American officials, captives, and commentators consistently framed their encounters with Barbary in commercial, diplomatic, and strategic terms. Religious and civilizational rhetoric certainly appeared, often drawing on existing European Orientalist discourses, but it did not dominate policy formation or contemporary understanding. Americans recognized themselves as dealing with sovereign states pursuing their interests through internationally recognized means, however objectionable Americans found those means.

The partisan transformation of Barbary policy following Jefferson's election to the presidency in 1800 further illustrates the domestic political dynamics shaping American responses. As president, Jefferson adopted more aggressive stances toward Barbary than he had advocated during the 1790s, deploying naval forces to the Mediterranean and prosecuting war against Tripoli. This shift reflected both his enhanced executive authority and his recognition that successful military action could provide political benefits, demonstrating decisive leadership and satisfying demands for assertive foreign policy (Faber, 2020).

4. The Post-9/11 Reframing: Constructing Proto-Terrorism in Historical Retrospect

4.1 Mechanisms of Historical Retrojection

The transformation of Barbary corsairs from state-sanctioned maritime raiders into proto-terrorists occurred rapidly in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, driven by the political demands of the War on Terror and facilitated by pre-existing Orientalist frameworks in American culture. This reframing required systematic erasure of the historical context established in previous sections, selective quotation of primary sources, and the retroactive application of terrorism as an analytical category to phenomena it does not fit.

The legal academy provided some of the earliest and most influential articulations of the Barbary-as-terrorism thesis. Robert F. Turner's 2003 article "State Responsibility and the War on Terror: The Legacy of Thomas Jefferson and the Barbary Pirates" exemplifies this genre. Turner argues that the Barbary Wars established precedents for military action against state sponsors of terrorism without congressional declarations of war, interpreting Jefferson's dispatch of naval forces to the Mediterranean as a proto-Authorization for Use of Military Force (Turner, 2003). This argument

depends on characterizing Barbary corsairs as terrorists and ignoring the substantial differences between congressionally authorized naval operations against sovereign states and post-9/11 interventions against non-state actors.

Turner's analysis involves several problematic moves. First, it strips corsairing of its legal and institutional context, presenting it as anarchic violence rather than state-sanctioned maritime warfare. Second, it characterizes Jefferson's naval deployments as unilateral executive action, ignoring both the Naval Act of 1794 and subsequent congressional authorizations for Mediterranean operations (Fisher, 2020). Third, it projects contemporary definitions of terrorism backward onto a historical moment when no such category existed, committing the fundamental anachronism that undermines the entire analogy.

While Turner's thesis has influenced legal scholars seeking executive power precedents, Ramsey (2004) and Prakash (2013) show Jefferson's actions remained constrained by specific congressional authorizations; constraints absent from modern presidential claims. The analogy thus fails to support contemporary assertions of inherent authority.

Political discourse followed similar patterns, with the Barbary Wars invoked to justify various elements of the War on Terror. President George W. Bush referenced the Marine Corps Hymn's "shores of Tripoli" line in his address to Congress on September 20, 2001, linking contemporary operations against al-Qaeda to historical American military action in North Africa (Rielly, 2008). This invocation, while oblique, contributed to the broader narrative framework positioning current conflicts as merely the latest chapter in a centuries-long struggle against Islamic aggression toward the West.

More explicit connections appeared in conservative political commentary and popular histories published after 2001. These works typically present the Barbary Wars as America's first confrontation with Islamic terrorism, emphasizing religious motivations for corsair attacks on American shipping while downplaying or ignoring the commercial and strategic dimensions that actually drove both corsairing and American responses (Fishbein, 2001). The selective use of quotations from Jefferson and others regarding the religious justifications offered by Barbary rulers creates a misleadingly monochromatic picture, ignoring the extensive evidence of pragmatic, interest-based negotiation documented in diplomatic archives.

4.2 Constructing the "Muslim Threat" Narrative

The construction of Barbary corsairs as proto-terrorists required particular attention to religious identity, amplifying the Islamic character of the North African regencies while minimizing or erasing the religious identity of European privateers. This asymmetry reveals the civilizational agenda underlying the reframing. When English or Dutch privateers captured Spanish ships, this was

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understood as warfare between Christian nations, with religion providing rhetorical justification but not constituting the fundamental cause. Yet when Algerian corsairs captured American ships, post-9/11 narratives present this as inherently religious violence—Islam against Christianity—rather than as commercial raiding by one state against the shipping of another (El-Shinqiti, 2013).

The emphasis on American captives' suffering in Barbary likewise underwent significant transformation in post-9/11 retellings. Historical captivity narratives certainly emphasized hardship and portrayed North African Muslims through Orientalist lenses (Boulahnane, 2018). Yet these narratives also acknowledged the systematic nature of captivity, the existence of diplomatic channels for securing release, and the fact that many captives eventually returned home through negotiated ransoms (Peskin, 2009). Post-9/11 versions flatten this complexity, presenting captivity as analogous to modern hostage-taking by terrorist organizations, ignoring the substantial differences between systematic state-administered captivity-for-ransom and the kidnapping of civilians by non-state actors.

The comparative erasure of European privateering from popular historical consciousness enabled the successful reframing of Barbary corsairing as uniquely threatening. Most Americans aware of the Barbary Wars remain ignorant of the extent to which European powers—including American allies—simultaneously practiced state-sanctioned maritime raiding. British impressment of American sailors, which helped precipitate the War of 1812, involved far more aggressive and systematic seizure of American citizens than anything attempted by Barbary corsairs (Gilje, 2017). Yet impressment does not feature in post-9/11 narratives as proto-terrorism, revealing the selectivity with which historical parallels are drawn.

4.3 Popular Culture and Institutional Memory

The reframing extended to visual and material culture, with museums, monuments, and public history sites increasingly presenting the Barbary Wars through a terrorism lens. The National Museum of the Marine Corps, opened in 2006, features exhibits on the Barbary Wars that emphasize their connection to current conflicts in the Middle East, with wall text drawing explicit parallels between Barbary corsairs and contemporary terrorist organizations (Davis, 2011). Such presentations shape public understanding of historical events, legitimizing the terrorism analogy through the authority of official historical institutions.

Popular culture productions similarly contributed to the reframing. Historical fiction, films, and television programs set during the Barbary Wars proliferated after 2001, often projecting contemporary concerns and categories backward onto the early nineteenth century. While historical fiction has always involved presentist elements, the post-9/11 productions demonstrate particular

consistency in portraying Barbary conflicts through terrorism frameworks, with religious fanaticism rather than state interest motivating North African actors (Voelz, 2009).

The role of historical reenactment, museums, and public history sites in perpetuating the terrorism narrative deserves particular attention. These institutions possess significant authority in shaping public historical consciousness, yet many have adopted the terrorism framing uncritically, presenting Barbary conflicts through lenses that emphasize civilizational conflict and religious warfare (Davis, 2011). When the National Museum of the Marine Corps draws explicit parallels between Barbary corsairs and contemporary terrorist organizations, it leverages institutional authority to legitimize historical distortion.

The consequences of this reframing extend beyond historical misunderstanding to concrete policy implications. The Barbary-as-terrorism narrative has been deployed to justify several controversial positions. First, it supports arguments for expanded executive war powers, with legal scholars citing Jefferson's Mediterranean deployments as precedents for unilateral presidential military action (Turner, 2003). Second, it reinforces civilizational narratives that position Islam as inherently hostile to the West, legitimizing discriminatory policies toward Muslim immigrants and refugees. Third, it naturalizes military intervention in Muslim-majority countries as a transhistorical American mission dating to the founding era.

Academic historians have generally resisted the Barbary-as-terrorism reframing, with specialized scholarship continuing to present these conflicts within their proper commercial, diplomatic, and strategic contexts (Parker, 2004; Peskin, 2009; Dzurec, 2019). Yet the gap between specialized historical knowledge and public understanding has widened, with popular narratives divorced from academic consensus gaining increasing cultural authority. This represents a significant challenge for historians, raising questions about scholarly communication, public engagement, and the political uses of historical narratives.

5. Consequences and Implications: Historical Distortion in Service of Contemporary Politics

5.1 Legal and Constitutional Misinterpretation

The reframing of Barbary corsairs as proto-terrorists carries significant consequences for both historical understanding and contemporary policy. This section examines these consequences across several domains: legal and constitutional interpretation, immigration and national security policy, foreign policy toward Muslim-majority nations, and the broader relationship between historical scholarship and public discourse.

In legal and constitutional interpretation, the Barbary-as-terrorism narrative has been deployed to justify expansive executive war powers. Robert Turner and other legal scholars have argued that

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Jefferson's deployment of naval forces to the Mediterranean without a formal congressional declaration of war establishes precedents for unilateral presidential military action against terrorism (Turner, 2003). This argument depends fundamentally on characterizing Barbary corsairing as terrorism rather than state-sponsored maritime warfare. If corsairing is properly understood as the latter, then Jefferson's actions provide no precedent for military operations against non-state terrorist organizations.

Moreover, the argument ignores the substantial congressional authorization that Jefferson did receive. The Naval Act of 1794 explicitly authorized naval construction for Mediterranean operations. Subsequent congressional acts provided additional authorizations and appropriations for naval forces deployed against Barbary. While Jefferson refrained from seeking a formal declaration of war, his actions fell within the scope of congressional authorization—a quite different situation from post-9/11 assertions of inherent executive authority to wage war against terrorism globally without geographic or temporal limitations (Fisher, 2020).

5.2 Foreign Policy and the Naturalization of Intervention

In foreign policy toward Muslim-majority nations, the Barbary narrative naturalizes military intervention as a transhistorical American mission. By constructing a two-century conflict between the United States and Islamic terrorism, advocates for military intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and other nations position these operations within a heroic American tradition dating to Jefferson. The narrative suggests that Muslim-majority nations require periodic military chastisement to respect American interests, echoing colonial-era justifications for gunboat diplomacy (Fishbein, 2001).

The Barbary analogy has also been invoked in debates over immigration and refugee policy, particularly regarding Muslim immigrants. Politicians and commentators have argued that America has faced Islamic threats since its founding, citing Barbary corsairing as evidence that Islam is inherently hostile to American values and interests (El-Shinqiti, 2013). This narrative constructs Muslim immigrants as potential fifth columns, importing civilizational conflict into American society. The historical inaccuracy of the underlying analogy—corsairing as terrorism, commercial disputes as civilizational warfare—undermines these policy arguments, though the narrative's cultural resonance has often overwhelmed scholarly correction.

The historical record contradicts this narrative. American relations with Muslim-majority nations have been diverse and contingent, shaped by specific historical circumstances rather than essential civilizational conflict. The alliance with Morocco dating to 1777—the longest unbroken treaty relationship in American history—demonstrates that Muslim-majority nations have often been

American partners rather than adversaries (Roberts & Tull, 1999). The post-9/11 reframing systematically erases this complexity, flattening diverse historical relationships into monolithic civilizational conflict.

5.3 The Scholarship-Public Discourse Gap

For historical scholarship, the Barbary terrorism narrative poses significant challenges regarding public engagement and the political uses of history. Specialized historians have consistently resisted the terrorism reframing, with recent scholarship emphasizing the commercial, diplomatic, and strategic dimensions of American-Barbary relations (Parker, 2004; Peskin, 2009; Mullen, 2017). Yet this scholarly consensus has failed to penetrate public consciousness, with popular narratives increasingly divorced from academic historiography.

This gap raises fundamental questions about scholarly communication and public history. Why has accurate historical scholarship failed to prevent or correct the Barbary terrorism narrative? What responsibilities do historians bear for engaging with public discourse and political uses of history? How can specialized knowledge be effectively communicated to broader audiences in contexts where ideologically useful myths possess greater cultural resonance than complex historical realities?

The Barbary case suggests that historical myths serving important ideological functions prove remarkably resistant to scholarly correction. The terrorism narrative serves multiple political purposes: justifying executive power, legitimizing military interventionism, reinforcing anti-Muslim prejudice, and positioning contemporary conflicts within heroic national traditions. These political utilities generate powerful incentives for maintaining the narrative regardless of historical accuracy.

Moreover, the terrorism framing possesses intuitive appeal, requiring minimal historical knowledge while drawing on deep cultural reservoirs of Orientalism in American society. The pirate motif triggers associations with lawlessness and illegitimacy, obscuring the state-sponsored character of corsairing. The emphasis on white captives under Muslim rule resonates with racialized fears and colonial-era narratives about civilized peoples threatened by barbarism. These cultural resonances give the terrorism narrative affective power that scholarly correction struggles to overcome.

The persistence of the terrorism analogy despite its historical inaccuracy suggests that it serves important ideological functions in contemporary American political culture. By constructing a centuries-long conflict between the United States and Islamic terrorism, the narrative naturalizes post-9/11 military interventions, positions them within a heroic American tradition, and deflects questions about their origins in more recent policy choices. The Barbary Wars become usable past, mobilized to justify present actions regardless of actual historical parallels.

5.4 The Scholarship-Public Discourse Gap

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Academic historians must develop more effective strategies for public engagement and myth correction. This requires recognizing that historical narratives circulate in political and cultural contexts where accuracy represents only one value among many. Effective intervention demands attention not just to factual correction but to the cultural work that myths perform and the alternative narratives that might serve emancipatory rather than reactionary political purposes.

The Barbary case also illustrates broader dynamics of historical memory and nationalist mythology. Nations construct usable pasts that serve present purposes, selectively remembering and forgetting historical events according to their utility for current political projects. American historical memory has always involved mythological elements—from Columbus to the Pilgrims to the Founding Fathers—that serve nation-building and political legitimation functions regardless of historical accuracy (Peskin, 2004).

Yet the post-9/11 reframing of Barbary represents something more pernicious than ordinary nationalist mythology. It instrumentalizes history to justify specific policies with concrete consequences: military interventions that have killed hundreds of thousands, immigration restrictions that separate families and condemn refugees to danger, surveillance and discrimination against Muslim Americans. The stakes of historical accuracy in this case extend beyond scholarly debates to questions of war, peace, and justice.

6. CONCLUSION

The post-9/11 transformation of Barbary corsairs into proto-terrorists represents a striking case of historical distortion in service of contemporary political agendas. This reframing required systematic erasure of the commercial, diplomatic, and strategic contexts that actually shaped American encounters with the North African regencies, selective quotation of primary sources, and the retroactive imposition of terrorism as an analytical category onto phenomena it fundamentally mischaracterizes.

The historical record demonstrates conclusively that Barbary corsairing operated as state-sanctioned maritime warfare within recognized international legal frameworks, closely paralleling European privateering in structure, function, and legal basis. American responses reflected pragmatic calculations about costs, benefits, and strategic priorities rather than civilizational antipathy toward Islam. The diplomatic correspondence, congressional debates, and treaty negotiations that constitute the archival record of American-Barbary relations reveal actors on both sides pursuing state interests through conventional diplomatic and military means.

The contemporary political utility of the Barbary terrorism narrative explains its persistence despite historical inaccuracy. By constructing a transhistorical conflict between America and Islamic terrorism, the narrative legitimizes military intervention, expands executive war powers, reinforces anti-Muslim prejudice, and positions contemporary policies within heroic national traditions. These functions generate powerful incentives for maintaining the myth regardless of scholarly correction.

Yet historical accuracy matters, both intrinsically and for its political implications. The policies justified through the Barbary terrorism narrative—military interventions, immigration restrictions, discrimination against Muslims—impose severe human costs. Historical scholarship that reveals the inaccuracy of the justifying narrative therefore possesses ethical as well as scholarly significance. Historians bear responsibility not merely for pursuing truth in specialized academic venues but for engaging public discourse and challenging politically useful myths.

This engagement requires recognizing that historical narratives circulate in cultural and political contexts where multiple values compete. Effective myth correction demands attention to the cultural work that myths perform and the construction of alternative narratives that might serve more just political purposes. Simply asserting historical facts proves insufficient when myths possess deep cultural resonance and serve important ideological functions.

The Barbary case offers broader lessons about historical memory, nationalist mythology, and the political uses of history. Nations inevitably construct usable pasts that serve present purposes, selectively remembering and forgetting according to current political needs. Yet not all historical constructions prove equally defensible, and some mythologies serve purposes sufficiently harmful that they demand active scholarly resistance.

Moving forward, historians must develop more effective strategies for public engagement while maintaining scholarly rigor and avoiding the opposite error of allowing political commitments to distort historical analysis. The goal should be neither detached neutrality nor political instrumentalization but rather historically grounded intervention in public discourse, recognizing both the constructed nature of all historical narratives and the ethical imperative to resist narratives that justify unnecessary violence and discrimination.

The Barbary corsairs were not proto-terrorists but state agents engaging in maritime warfare for commercial and strategic purposes within the recognized international frameworks of their era. American encounters with Barbary reflected the challenges facing a newly independent nation seeking to establish commercial relationships and diplomatic standing in a world dominated by European imperial powers. The conflicts that arose were resolved through conventional diplomatic and military means, establishing precedents for American naval power and international engagement rather than for counterterrorism.

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Recovering this more accurate historical understanding serves both scholarly and ethical purposes. It restores historical complexity against mythological simplification, reveals the contingent and constructed nature of contemporary narratives, and undermines justifications for harmful policies premised on historical distortion. In a political moment when the stakes of historical memory remain high, such scholarly work carries special urgency and significance.

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