

# Fleeing from the Shores of Tripoli: America's First Messy Retreat from a Foreign War and the Backlash it Engendered



The United States' recent withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the harrowing scenes that accompanied it, created a political firestorm. Republicans, and even many Democrats, lambasted President Biden for conducting a messy retreat, and for leaving America's Afghan allies vulnerable to reprisals from the Taliban. The harrowing scenes at the Kabul airport naturally sent politicians, news pundits, and armchair political analysts searching for historical precedents for such a calamitous military withdrawal. Many focused on the similarities to the chaotic American evacuation from Saigon in 1975 following the Vietnam War. Yet an even earlier precedent can be found in United States history: America's evacuation from North Africa during the First Barbary War (1801-1805). The hasty withdrawal from North Africa, like that from Afghanistan, caused turmoil abroad when the United State abandoned its local Muslim allies, and triggered political backlash at home.



Figure 1: 1817 map depicting the Barbary States of North Africa (from left to right, Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli), from G.A. Jackson, *Algiers: Being a Complete Picture of the Barbary States* (London: R. Edwards, 1817). See page for author, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The First Barbary War, also known as the Tripolitan War, pitted the United States against the kingdom of Tripoli. Shortly after Americans gained their independence, Tripoli, along with the other Barbary States of North Africa (Algiers, Morocco, and Tunis), threatened to attack American shipping unless the U.S. government paid them annual tribute in the form of money, gunpowder, and naval supplies. The United States reluctantly agreed. But in 1801, Yusuf Karamanli, the Bashaw (or monarch) of Tripoli, increased his tribute demands. When the American government refused, Karamanli declared war. President Thomas Jefferson dispatched the American Navy to deal with the crisis. The First Barbary War had begun.



Figure 2: As part of the blockade of Tripoli harbor, the American Navy conducted several large bombardments, like the one depicted in this artwork from 1805. Ultimately, however, the bombardments and the blockade were inconclusive. *The Attack Made on Tripoli on the 3d. August 1804* (Livorno, Italy: s.n., 1805). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Massachusetts.

After two years of war, Jefferson realized the United States needed to change its strategy. He had hoped that a naval blockade of Tripoli harbor would be enough to compel the Bashaw to seek peace. But in 1803, the blockade weakened dramatically when the frigate USS *Philadelphia* grounded on a reef within Tripoli harbor, and all 307 American crewmembers were taken prisoner. To reverse America's misfortune, Jefferson turned to William Eaton, the American Consul to Tunis. Eaton had previously lobbied the administration on a plan to attack Tripoli from land and sea simultaneously. In Eaton's plan, the U.S. would invade North Africa and depose Bashaw Yusuf, replacing him with his brother, Hamet Karamanli, who had been exiled in a political struggle. Once on the throne, Hamet would free all American prisoners and renounce American tribute payments. Jefferson initially viewed Eaton's plan as too risky, but in the aftermath of the *Philadelphia* debacle, the President approved it.



Figure 3: Engraving of William Eaton near the time of the Tripolitan War. Charles Balthazar Julien Fevret de Saint-Memin, "General Eaton, 1808." National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution; gift of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon.

In November 1804, Eaton and eight U.S. marines landed in Egypt, where Hamet was living in exile. Within weeks Eaton had rendezvoused with Hamet and formed an alliance with several hundred local Arab mercenaries. Eaton then led his "marauding militia" as he called them, along with the families of his Arab allies, over six hundred miles across the deserts of North Africa from Egypt into the territory of Tripoli. In a brief but intense battle, Eaton's soldiers captured Derne, a fortified city within the domain of the Bashaw, and proclaimed it in the name of Hamet. Decades later, U.S. marines were so proud of their role in the victory that they added the line "To the Shores of Tripoli" in their now-famous hymn.



a handful of Hamet's servants, quietly got into rowboats and headed out towards the USS *Constellation*, leaving much of their equipment, and every Arab ally behind.

Just as the final rowboat left the shore, the Arab soldiers and residents of Derne realized what had transpired. From his vantage on the ocean, Eaton described the panic that ensued:

. . . the shore, our camp, and the battery were crowded with the distracted soldiery and populace. . . . Some uttering shrieks—some execrations. Finding we were out of reach, they fell upon our tents and horses, which were left standing; carried them off, and prepared themselves for flight. . . . Before break of day our Arabs were all off to the mountains, and with them such of the inhabitants of the town as had means to fly. . . . In a few minutes more we shall lose sight of this devoted city, which has experienced as strange a reverse in so short a time as ever was recorded in the disasters of war; thrown from proud success and elated prospects into an abyss of hopeless wretchedness . . . this moment we drop them from ours into the hands of this enemy for no other crime but too much confidence in us!

Some of Eaton's former allies scattered into the countryside, desperate to evade the besieging army, while others barricaded themselves inside the city and pledged to fight to the death rather than surrender and face likely execution. As the *Constellation* sailed away, Eaton lost sight of Derne and its inhabitants; the fate of those left behind remains unknown.

Just as with the withdrawal from Afghanistan, the evacuation from Tripoli generated political controversy in the United States. President Jefferson had hoped the end of hostilities would cause jubilation amongst the American public. But some of the enthusiasm for the war's end was sapped when news leaked of Eaton's sudden retreat just as he appeared to be on the verge of victory. Some Americans were also incensed at the terms of the treaty mandating ransom to Tripoli. Federalists, the opposition party to the administration, seized on the ransom payment and the retreat from Derne as a convenient way to condemn Jefferson. In February 1806, a newspaper from coastal Maine, a Federalist stronghold, criticized ransoming the prisoners instead of letting Eaton rescue them: "How much more gratifying to the prisoners, how much more glorious to America it would have been, to have seen the strong arm of yankee bravery, breaking the iron bars . . ." In January 1806, Jefferson defended his actions to Congress in a written address, declaring that he had always envisioned the alliance with Hamet to be limited in scope. "We certainly had never contemplated," declared Jefferson somewhat facetiously, "nor were we prepared to land an army of our own, or to raise, pay, or subsist an army of Arabs, to march from Derne to Tripoli, and to carry on a land war at such a distance from our resources." Jefferson blamed Eaton for being too "zealous" and for misconstruing the administration's intentions to Hamet.



Figure 5: This engraving by artist G. M. Brighty depicts Europeans enslaved by an Algerine taskmaster. Many Americans and Europeans expressed outrage at paying ransom to free Christian captives from the Barbary States. From G. A. Jackson, *Algiers: Being a Complete Picture of the Barbary States* (London: 1817), G. M. Brighty, Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Hamet never forgave Jefferson nor the American government for what he considered a betrayal. He knew his chance of reclaiming the Tripolitan throne with the aid of the United States had passed, but he wrote several letters from his exile in Syracuse to Americans, including President Jefferson, begging for compensation "for those comforts lost by uniting my fortune to [the United States]." Eaton lobbied Congress on Hamet's behalf, and in 1806 Congress formed a committee to investigate Hamet's claims. Federalists seized the opportunity to publicly shame Jefferson for precipitously abandoning Eaton's expedition. Members of the committee solicited testimony from American naval officers declaring their opinion that Eaton could have easily conquered Tripoli had his expedition been allowed to proceed. In April 1806, the committee authorized a one-time payment of \$2,400 to Hamet, but Congress subsequently ceased all future assistance, closing the door forever on their relationship with the exiled Barbary prince.

Like Hamet, Eaton maintained a grudge against Jefferson. He resigned his government post and returned to America, where he publicly criticized the administration for ending the war before achieving total victory. Even in 1808, Eaton was still complaining in public about the "disgraceful treaty" that left "an ally [Hamet] . . . starving in the wretched ruins of Syracuse." Many Americans viewed Eaton as a hero and praised him for his exploits in North Africa, but his outspoken criticisms of Jefferson earned him enemies. Federalists defended Eaton's reputation in the hopes that his fame would act as a blot on Jefferson's presidency, and even attempted to grant him land and a medal, but Jeffersonians in Congress voted both down. Meanwhile, Jefferson's allies circulated stories about Eaton's supposed involvement with Aaron Burr's treasonous conspiracy. Eaton's public reputation never recovered, and he died in 1811, perhaps from alcoholism-related maladies, with some evidence of having suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder caused by his campaign in Tripoli.



Figure 6: *Attack on Derna* (1998), an acrylic painting by artist Charles Waterhouse, was commissioned by the United States Marine Corps to celebrate their role in the capture of Derne. This battle has become enshrined in Marine Corps lore, but the subsequent clandestine evacuation is seldom acknowledged. Colonel Charles Waterhouse, *U.S. Marines* ([Marine Corps Art Collection](#)), Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

Studying the aftermath of the evacuation from Tripoli provides perspective on the current fallout from the withdrawal from Afghanistan. Given the intense partisanship of the Jeffersonian Era, the political attacks for the hasty peace and withdrawal from Tripoli were to be expected, but the criticisms died down within a few years as other domestic and foreign policy issues captured the nation's attention. Over time, the retreat from Derne and abandonment of Hamet and the Arab allies became lost to history, overshadowed by a memorialization of the Tripolitan War which emphasized America's military achievements. To apply this precedent to the current day, Republicans will do all they can to keep the ugly scenes of the evacuation from Afghanistan at the front of voters' minds, but over time, the tragic final days at the Kabul airport may become just another sad footnote in a longer history of the war.

Comparing the withdrawals from Afghanistan and Tripoli also reveals a historical lesson: it is far easier to start a war than to end one. Neither Jefferson, nor the various presidents who oversaw the Afghanistan War, seemed to have adequately planned for the optics and related fallout of a withdrawal from their respective war zones, and the outcome of both evacuations was similarly tragic. Both conflicts also ended calamitously for the local Muslims who allied with the United States, only to be abandoned once the Americans unilaterally decided to cease fighting. As the insight commonly attributed to Mark Twain cautions us: History never repeats itself, but it does often rhyme. Let us hope we do not hear this particular rhyme again anytime soon.

## **Note on Sources and Further Reading**

Most of the primary sources for this essay come from *Naval Documents Related to the United States War with the Barbary Powers*, a six-volume edited collection of letters and journal entries of American naval personnel, compiled by the

Department of the Navy in the 1930s and 1940s. Another helpful source was Charles Prentiss, *Life of the Late General William Eaton* (Brookfield, MA: E. Merriam & Co., 1813). Prentiss, a close friend of Eaton, published this biography two years after his death in which he detailed Eaton's post-war criticisms of the Jefferson administration and the resultant drop in his popularity.

In the last few decades, especially after 9/11, scholarly interest in the Tripolitan War has increased dramatically. For a military history of the conflict, see Chipp Reid, *Intrepid Sailors: The Legacy of Preble's Boys and the Tripoli Campaign* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012), and Joshua London, *Victory in Tripoli: How America's War with the Barbary Pirates Established the U.S. Navy and Built a Nation* (New York: Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2005). For scholarship focusing on Eaton's expedition, see Chipp Reid, *To the Walls of Derne: William Eaton, the Tripoli Coup, and the End of the First Barbary War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2017), and A. B. C. Whipple, *To the Shores of Tripoli: The Birth of the U.S. Navy and Marines* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991). I highly recommend Frank Lambert's *The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005) in which he expertly contextualizes the First Barbary War within the early history of the United States. Robert Parker, former American ambassador to Algeria and Morocco, provides the most thorough overview of American diplomacy with the Barbary States in the decades before the Tripolitan War in *Uncle Sam in Barbary: A Diplomatic History* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004). Lastly, for a thorough examination of the Tripolitan War's impact on American politics, consult Lawrence Peskin, *Captives and Countrymen: Barbary Slavery and the American Republic, 1785-1816* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009).

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