

First Encounters between the United States and the Muslim World

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Captain Bainbridge set a unique table. Each quarter of the globe, America, Asia, Africa, and Europe, was represented by a decanter of fresh water drawn from it. He had samples of foods from each continent brought to the table simultaneously, to the great delight of his guests, who also came from the four corners of the world.

This multicultural banquet was made possible by its location. Bainbridge entertained his guests just outside İstanbul, on board the USS *George Washington*, the first American warship to visit Turkey. Could there have been a more appropriate place for this multi-national gathering, drawing together people from all over the world, than on board an American ship named for the hero of the American revolution and first President of the United States, at the precise point where Europe meets Asia?

Bainbridge had made a strong impression some weeks earlier (9 November 1800) when he first arrived in Turkey, despite the fact that no one in the government recognized the American flag, nor had anyone heard of the United States. Bainbridge finally was asked if his country was not also called the “New World.” When he said indeed it was, the messenger left for the shore, returning in a few hours with a lamb, a symbol of peace, and flowers, as a mark of welcome. Sultan Selim III permitted the ship to enter the inner harbor, and as the *George Washington* passed his palace the Sultan paid particular attention to its flag. He noted a heavenly convergence: stars on the American flag, and the crescent on Turkey’s flag, that suggested “analogy between the people and the laws, religion, habits and manners of the Americans and Mussulmen [sic.]” (Dearborn 20; see also Harris).

A trading relationship had already opened. In July 1800 the merchant ship *Martha* had arrived in İzmir, where it spent a month discharging one cargo and taking on another. To have *George Washington* follow *Martha* so closely, to have the Sultan note the similarities between the flags of his empire and the United States, boded well for future relations between İstanbul and Washington (*Ship Martha Log*).

Bainbridge arrived in Turkey after a long series of false starts in this relationship. In May 1784, Congress had authorized its agents in Europe, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, to meet with representatives of the Ottoman Sultan. But France's minister of foreign affairs, the Comte de Vergennes, a former French minister to Istanbul, had told Adams that such a treaty would benefit Americans little (and presumably benefit France less) (Paullin 126-127). Though Franklin did meet with at least one Turkish official (in 1800, the then Capudan Pacha's secretary would ask Bainbridge about his old friend Franklin), Adams dropped the idea. In 1786, after Algiers had captured two American merchant ships, Adams and Jefferson again considered a Turkish negotiation, but again did nothing. William Carmichael, American agent in Madrid, wanted the Americans to act, and not heed the counsel of France: "We shall never be respected until we respect ourselves," he wrote Jefferson on 15 July 1786 (*Papers of Thomas Jefferson* 10:137-138). The latter proposed a multi-national alliance of non-aligned states with a naval force led by John Paul Jones, the American naval hero who had written to him on 31 July 1785 that military action against Algiers would show that the Americans were a "great people who deserved to be Free" (*Papers of Thomas Jefferson* 8:334). Jefferson proposed this idea to diplomats from Portugal, Russia, and Naples, but abandoned the idea when Vergennes again stepped in, telling Jefferson's chief French ally, Lafayette, that France would not permit such a plan to be developed on French soil. Jones served Catherine the Great's navy in Russia's war against Turkey. Writing to Jefferson (from Saint Petersburg) on 31 January 1789, he said that "if the new government of America determines to chastise the Algerines [sic]" they should make "a common cause with Russia in the Mediterranean," with American sailors serving on Russian ships under his command (*Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States of America* 7:395). Nothing came of this intriguing idea. Ten years later, the US made a completely different move on the Turkish front, this time to join Turkey in an alliance against France, with whom both were at war. John Pickering, son of the American secretary of state, was dispatched on a mission to Turkey, but the project was cancelled because the Mediterranean was deemed too dangerous to travel (see Timothy Pickering's letter of 5 May 1799 from Philadelphia to John Pickering; and John Pickering's letter of 3 June 1799 from Lisbon to Timothy Pickering in *Pickering Family Manuscripts*). Bainbridge arrived in Turkey not as an official emissary of the US, but as a courier for the Dey of Algiers, who had commanded Bainbridge, bringing the US tribute to his regency, to carry the Dey's gifts to the Sultan. Not an auspicious beginning, but a beginning of which Bainbridge made the most. Would his dinner party symbolize a growing friendship between these two distant nations, each estranged from the politics of Europe? Did it portend future gatherings hosted by the United States, a place where all people of the world could find welcome?

Positive answers to these questions lay far in the future, beyond the lifetimes of Bainbridge and his guests. Americans had a profound ignorance of the Muslim world, seeing Muslim societies in general, and the Ottoman state in particular, as

powerful symbols of the wrong way to build political and social organizations. Americans, in fact, had inherited a particular European idea on the nature of Muslim societies, and as they built their own political society they used this image of Islam as a model for what to avoid. For Americans the Ottoman state and other Muslim societies were as much symbols as they were countries. Americans had an image of these nations rooted in ideology and history, and this image shaped the American reaction to the real Muslims they encountered.

Encounter them they did, as over a hundred American sailors were captured by Algiers in the 1790s. The US followed the policy of other European powers in paying tribute to Algiers and the other Barbary states, though Jefferson, Bainbridge, Jones, and Carmichael all believed the US should set a different example. The Americans were creating a new kind of political society which would not succumb to the corruption and avarice of the old world. For the US to follow the corrupt practices of the Old World would inevitably corrupt the society Americans were trying to create. They would then share the same fate of every other nation in the world, and ultimately degenerate into a political system like the Ottoman empire, about which they had read in John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon's *Cato's Letters* (1724) and Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* (1749) and other political tracts.

Americans believed that all people of the world were of equal endowment and capabilities. Why, then, would the people of Turkey submit to this kind of despotic power? The answer, Americans came to believe, lay in their religion. Islam, according to writers who knew very little about Islam, encouraged a kind of listless acceptance of fate and a blind submission to authority.

This is brought home in an 1802 book, *The Life of Mahomet; or, the History of that Imposture which was Begun, Carried on, and Finally Established by Him in Arabia; and Which has Subjugated a Larger portion of the Globe, than the Religion of Jesus has Yet Set at Liberty. To which is added, an Account of Egypt*. The story of Muhammed's establishment of Islam, the anonymous author wrote, was "deeply affecting to a philanthropic heart," as it showed how "the consummate artifice and wickedness of a single individual" could degrade "millions of rational beings" to the "rank of brutes." This kind of intellectual tyranny permitted a political tyranny, and the author saw no recourse but for Christian nations to invade Muslim countries in order to free the "sentiments of men" from the fetters of Islam, to permit a "mental revolution" aided by "the formidable attacks of reason and judgment." Military intervention was necessary to allow this intellectual liberation (125, 85, 83-84).

Islam permitted, the Americans believed, the kind of tyranny they were convinced existed throughout the Muslim world. This tyranny, in turn, bred, they reasoned, the social stagnation European observers believed they saw in Islamic countries. French philosopher Volney, who traveled through Egypt and Syria in the 1780s,

and was awarded a medal by Catherine the Great for his pro-Russian pamphlet on the Turkish war (1788-1790) pondered the ruins of the great empires of Mesopotamia and Egypt, concluding their decline had been brought on by Islamic intolerance and political decadence. Volney's meditation on this history, *The Ruins, or a Survey of the Revolutions of Empires*, proved so influential that even though it had been twice translated into English, President Jefferson busied himself preparing a new translation during his presidential administration.

Works such as *Life of Mahomet* or *The Ruins* were not curiosities about different worlds, but warnings about what might happen if Americans failed to create the proper kind of political society. Not all American observers were confident that they had avoided the snares of intolerance or tyranny. At about the same time Bainbridge hosted his multi-national dinner party, an American writer pondered similarities and differences between American and Islamic societies. In *Humanity in Algiers, or the Story of Azem*, the author found the most alarming contradiction between American professions of liberty and American practice. The captures by Algiers, the author (who called himself simply "An American") wrote, should not have been a surprise as the Algerians,

only retaliate on us for similar barbarities. . . . Unconscious of our own crimes, or unwilling the world should know them, we frequently condemn in others the very practices we applaud in ourselves, and wishing to pass for patterns of uprightness, or blinded by interest, pass sentence upon the conduct of others less culpable than ourselves. (3-4)

The captivity of Americans in Algiers was a retribution for American enslavement of Africans.

Others made this same point. Franklin's last published essay was a satire of a Georgia congressman's pro-slavery speech, which Franklin simply rewrote, changing the Georgian's references to "Africans" to "Christians," and claiming the speech had been made a century earlier by an Algerian official. The same arguments which justified enslaving Africans, Franklin knew, would justify enslaving Christians, and if it was brutal and immoral to enslave one group of people, why not another ("On the Slave Trade" 517-521). Royall Tyler's 1797 novel *The Algerine Captive* has its protagonist, Updike Underhill, taken by Algiers after a slaving voyage to West Africa. The "slavery" of Americans in Algiers was a punishment for the slavery of Africans in America. A poem of 1797, *The American in Algiers; or the Patriot of Seventy-Six in Captivity*, by an anonymous poet, has a white veteran of Bunker Hill, held captive in Algiers, narrate the first canto, while a black veteran of Bunker Hill enslaved in America narrates the second (see also Allison).

Humanity in Algiers, purporting to be a true story, was not the first notice of the contradiction between American professions and practices, but may have been one of the first American anti-slavery novels. Azem, the title character, was a Senegalese slave in Algiers. He earned his freedom by saving his master's daughter from an Arab rapist, and went into business trading between Algiers and Senegal. In the course of his trading journeys he finds his mother, and learns that Alzina, a Senegalese slave in Algiers, whom he has been trying to free from her rich and lustful owner Valachus, is actually his sister. Valachus's

youth and independence of fortune render him callous to the feelings of pity, and deaf to the voice of reason. He has but just entered upon his large paternal inheritance; and flushed with that self-importance which generally attends wealth newly acquired, will, I know, be obstinate against any argument that may be employed to alter him from what his passions may seem to dictate, or his will determine. (71-72)

This comment critique seems aimed as much at newly independent Americans as it is at the fictional Valachus. What would restrain this young, newly-independent nation, flushed with self-importance, from listening more to the call of passion than of compassion?

Valachus fails to succumb to moral reason, but does succumb to the plague, and he frees Alzina on his deathbed. On the reunion of Azem and Alzina, Omri delivers a sermon:

And may every master, in whatever part of the inhabited globe he may reside, with cheerfulness practice that important precept of the Alcoran—"Masters, treat your servants with kindness." So may the light of Islamism shine forth, in its full splendor, to the utmost ends of the universe! For thus saith the God of all men: Of one blood have I created all nations of men that dwell upon the face of the earth. (98-99; see also Letter to the Ephesians 6:9)

This is all good Christian as well as Islamic doctrine, and the author used this Muslim sermon to shame Americans into seeing their own hypocrisy. But for every author like this one, who saw the enslavement of Americans in Algiers as an indictment of American enslavement of Africans, many others saw the American wars against Algiers and Tripoli as attempts to enlarge the sphere of liberty. Bostonian James Ellison's 1811 play *The American Captive, or the Siege of Tripoli* celebrated the American victory, neatly dispatching the problem of slavery. In this play, Jack Binnacle, an American sailor held captive in Tripoli, waxes poetic about his country, telling the overseer El Hassan that America was "a charming place . . . no slavery there! All freeborn sons!" El Hassan asks, "No slavery, hey?"

Go where the Senegal winds its course, and ask the wretched mothers for their husbands and their sons! What will be their answer? *Doom'd to slavery, and in thy boasted country, too!*" Binnacle's embarrassment is temporary, as at this moment his ship's cook, a black man named Juba, appears and is able to tell Hassan that in New England, presumably Jack Binnacle's home, and the place where this play was performed, slavery has been abolished. "O Massa, no no; we brack gentlemen be all *free!*" Juba reports (37-38). Juba exonerates the New England audience from their own possible complicity in the sin of slavery, but his exaggerated black dialect, and his addressing Binnacle and Hassan as "Massa," also reinforces the fact that people of color were free, but not equal, in Massachusetts.

Though irony crept in, the celebratory mode dominated the political rhetoric of the day. Joseph Hanson's epic poem *The Musselmen Humbled, or, a Heroic Poem in Celebration of the Bravery Displayed by the American Tars, in the Contest with Tripoli* is fairly typical of the way this war was remembered. According to this poem, the "audacious Tripolitans," a "cruel and unprincipled enemy," a "rude race of Barbarians," and a "despicable foe," had "expected to see American citizens submit to their insults and impositions." But the "valorous conduct of your brave Tars," inspired by "justice and freedom," had taught the "plundering vassals of the tyrannical Bashaw [sic]" of Tripoli "that on this side of the Atlantic, dwells a race of beings! of equal spirit to the first of nations" (4-5). This epic poem does not question American moral purpose.

Perhaps the most influential book coming out of the encounter between the US and the Muslim world, *An Authentic Narrative of the Loss of the American Brig Commerce*, conveyed both the idea of national purpose and the moral limitations of American society. Its author James Riley was an American captain, whose ship *Commerce* wrecked off the coast of Mauritania in 1815. Riley and his crew barely survived the wreck and their captivity in a desert tribe. Distributed among several bands of desert people, all were put to work as slaves. With little food (though no less than anyone else in the nomadic band) and no protection from the sun (their clothing had all been taken by their captors), Riley and his men withered and burned, and then were mocked by the other captives, particularly a black African slave, Boireck, who entertained the other slaves and Berber women in nightly imitations of Riley and his American crewmen, "who could not even bear the rays of the sun (the image of God, as they termed it)." Boireck mockingly called Riley "Rais," or captain. When one of Riley's men complains of this abuse, Riley silences him: "[L]et the negro laugh if he can take any pleasure in it. . . . he is a poor slave himself, naked and destitute, far from his family and friends, and is only trying to gain the favour of his masters and mistresses, by making sport of us, whom he considers to be as much inferior to him as he is to them." (91-92; for more on Riley, see Allison 223-225). Riley understood that Boireck had found a survival mechanism, and did not begrudge him. Riley knew that his men must learn

to survive, and do all they can to get a message to Mogadore, where he hoped they could be ransomed by a European ship or consul.

Relief came from two desert traders, Sidi Hamet and his brother Said, returning to Morocco from a trading venture into the Sahara. Sidi Hamet decides to buy Riley, having experienced the shock of recognition on seeing the emaciated and sunburned American—a merchant trader like himself, having left his home and family in a distant land, now faced death and disaster in a strange and hostile world. Sidi Hamet and Riley seem to have lived parallel lives. Sidi Hamet had ventured south from Morocco to Timbuktu, with a caravan of 4000 camels and one thousand men. They had gone down the Niger to buy slaves and gold, but disasters struck, killing the camels and all but four of the men. Sidi Hamet, ruined as a trader but lucky to have escaped with his life, spent a long time wondering why he had been spared. When he saw Riley he understood: God had preserved his life so that he could preserve Riley's, he could redeem his own humanity by devoting the rest of his life to ransoming captives. Sidi Hamet took Riley and the rest of his shipmates still in the Arab camp to the British consul at Mogadore, and then returned to the desert in search of the others.

Sidi Hamet inspired Riley, who pledged in his book to devote his own life to ending the scourge of American slavery. His book, still a compelling story of survival, was one of the best-sellers in nineteenth-century America. More than a million copies sold before the Civil War, and Riley was given a tract of land in Ohio and other honors by his homeland when he returned to it, a leaner and wiser man. His book continued to speak for him even after his death in 1840. In 1860, Presidential candidate Abraham Lincoln listed the books that had most influenced his life: the Bible, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Franklin's *Autobiography*, Aesop's *Fables*, Parson Weems's *Life of Washington*, and Riley's *Narrative*. Riley's book is the only one on the list with a clear anti-slavery message (McMurtry 134).

This encounter with the Muslim world provoked two very different responses in Americans. On the one hand, Americans looked to the fundamental differences between their society and those of Turkey or North Africa, and saw in the American wars against Algiers and Tripoli a sign that their nation was different from the corrupt old states of Europe. On the other hand, some Americans questioned how people who owned as many slaves as they did could question the moral values of others. Abolitionists, particularly after 1830, returned to the theme of Islam as a counterpoint to American slaveholding.

The celebratory mode has had a more lasting impact. The war with Tripoli demonstrated American purpose. The naval battle between the *Enterprize* and the *Tripolitan*, less than a year after Bainbridge's reception in Istanbul, cost no American lives. President Jefferson said the victory proved the bravery of Americans; thus it was not want of courage which made Americans seek peace, but

“a conscientious desire to direct the energies of our nation to the multiplication of the human race, and not to its destruction” (327).

Perhaps the most striking relic of the war is a song, written to celebrate the return of the American heroes and captives (among them Captain Bainbridge, who spent eighteen months as a prisoner of war) from Tripoli. Bainbridge, Stephen Decatur, and others were honored by a banquet in Georgetown, Maryland. Part of the entertainment was a song written for the occasion by lawyer Francis Scott Key. Key set his song to a well-known British drinking song, though the tune is today familiar to every American. This song brings us a long way from the heavenly convergence the Sultan saw in the two flags. In the third verse the “light of the star-spangled flag of our nation” obscures the splendor of the crescent, and the turbaned heads bow in submission, not to Allah, but to the power of the American republic.

Captain Bainbridge’s banquet was an episode, not a beginning. Bainbridge himself would return to Turkey in 1821, this time on the US ship *Columbus*, but would not be permitted to pass through the Dardanelles. The United States and Turkey would not make a treaty until 1832, though American merchants still traded in İzmir (Harris 231). The promise of harmony and friendship had proven elusive. Americans, fed by seventeenth and eighteenth century European political writers, could not see in the Muslim world anything but a symbol of what to avoid in creating political societies, or a distorted mirror image of what could happen to Americans if they failed to create the perfect society. The fear of what they saw in this mirror forced the wiser Americans to struggle against the sins of their own society. For many others, it would be enough to struggle against the phantom they believed threatened them through the glass.

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