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HP 410 - American Diplomacy  
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Reflective Essay No. 1  
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## -The Barbary Wars-

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### *American Independence in the Atlantic World*

*"The author of The Barbary Wars has subtitled his book "American Independence in the Atlantic World." What do you think he means by this? Do you think the struggle between the United States and the Barbary Pirates was a "clash of civilizations" or a conflict over commercial advantage? Why?"*

The English speaker uses the word **independence** to express the "quality or state of being independent." To be **independent** is to not be "subject to control by others," and being synonymous with the term **free**, it applies to the state of not being "obstructed, restricted, or impeded." It "stresses the complete absence of external rule and the full right to make all of one's own decisions."<sup>i</sup>

Leading up to the American War for Independence, many Americans were governing themselves semi-autonomously (some colonies did so for nearly 150 years). Although subordinate to the British Crown, Americans felt that they were capable of being free, and were confident that their track record in handling their affairs was proof enough. For the most part, as it seems to me, that the colonials were content in having basic rights of self-government granted to them.

That was until the Mother Country, Great Britain, amassed a substantial debt from the many wars that she had fought during that time period. Although the American Colonies did not have the proper representation in Parliament, they found themselves becoming the victim of "taxation without representation." Taxes were placed upon important items such as tea, paper, sugar, and molasses. America found herself to be subject to "a history of repeated injuries and usurpations"<sup>ii</sup> that directly violated the rights and privileges that all free men are "endowed [with] by their Creator,"<sup>iii</sup> and that all governments are "instituted among Men"<sup>iv</sup> to "secure"<sup>v</sup> for them. Some 26 grievances are listed in the Declaration of Independence.<sup>vi</sup> Once the revolution was won, and independence granted, the colonists worked to organize a government centered on individual liberties; the states were strong and the national government was weak, and without a chief executive like today's president, there was little to worry about some monarch from taking power. All of this was guaranteed by the Articles of the Confederation.

With minimal dependency within the nation, Americans dreamed and expected the same on the outside: important matters such as trade agreements and diplomatic relations should be free and

should operate without hindrance. However, this dream didn't come true without struggle, for the rest of the world failed to live up to America's high expectations.

Great Britain basically ignored America, and all of Europe failed to recognize trade relations with the States as an asset; they saw it in another light – if not at the complete other end of the spectrum. They viewed the United States of America as a threat and as a competitor – an entity capable of upsetting the balance of power and a potential economic rival. If America becomes too powerful they reasoned, the possibility of dealing with a similar revolution from within their own country and the problem of facing another player in the military, political and economic scene from the outside their country were all threats not worth dealing with.

With no one to protect shipping, America ventured into the Mediterranean to make trade. This was dangerous to undertake due to the threat of piracy from the Barbary States of northern Africa. Due to lack of resources, the Arab nations resorted to Maritime crime to supply their economy. It was common for an innocent merchant ship to “fly a foreign flag to ‘lure the unsuspecting victim within striking distance.’ Then gunners perched on the rigging would ‘ply the shot with unabated rapidity,’ raking the victim’s deck. Meanwhile ‘the fighting men stand ready, their arms bared, muskets primed, and scimitars flashing, waiting for the order to board.’”<sup>vii</sup> Then, when the leader would give the signal, “the pirates leaped aboard the prize.” “Their war cry was appalling; and the fury of the onslaught was such as to strike panic into the stoutest heart.’ After overcoming the crew, the pirates chained survivors, who became hostages for ransom or slaves for sale, manned the captured ship, and proceeded to their home port.”<sup>viii</sup>

At first, America attempted to make treaties with some of these nations. Regardless, some ships were still captured and held, but mostly to speed up the negotiation processes. However, these acts angered some Americans into rattling their sabers. Among this faction was Thomas Jefferson, who reasoned that the cost of paying tribute and negotiating treaties was more costly than building a Navy (which was already needed to begin with), and going to war. Opposed by John Adams, who thought that treaties were worth consideration, Jefferson lost the war of opinions. Congress approved \$80,000<sup>ix</sup> to be used in negotiating with Morocco, the nation that captured the *Betsey*.

More ship seizing was to come, as Algiers captured the *Maria* and the *Dauphin*. Demands from the offending government exceeded \$18,000,000 – adjusted for today's inflation.<sup>x</sup> Negotiations continued, despite that many times the weak Congress provided insufficient funding.

Eventually, a new Constitution was ratified that provided America with a more powerful central government. Powers included the ability to tax, regulate commerce, and to build and maintain a military force. But even with these powers, delays were still present. As time went on, the sentiment for forceful action in resolving the situation began to grow. In March 1794, the government approved the building of a navy, and the acts of forming alliances for mutual interests in the Mediterranean. Included in this alliance was Portugal.

With more money being forked over to the Barbary States, the U.S. Navy was finally formed. The new military branch survived her first test when fourteen U.S. warships successfully captured over eighty

French warships and forced others from American waters. Yet still, even our military strength, we still continued our tribute-giving. In 1800, the *George Washington* sailed bearing gifts to Algiers. Once the presents were received, the ship's commander was ordered to change flags and sail materials to Constantinople (now Istanbul). After his refusal, the ship was confiscated by Algiers.

Additionally, when tribute was refused, the American consulate was violated, and the national banner desecrated as its staff was chopped down. Finally, the banshaw announced that he would "declare War against the United States of America in six months to commence from the 22<sup>nd</sup> day of October 1800 if his demands were not complied with." With more and more tribute being demanded from multiple Barbary Nations, with the formal declaration of war from Tripoli, and with the new administration led by Thomas Jefferson, America was ready for war.

Indeed, the conflict between the Barbary States and the United States was in part cultural, as are all conflicts. We all live our lives differently, and on many occasions these differences cause sparks to fly. In this instance, economic and political prizes were also at stake; America had much to gain from free trade, and the Barbary pirates – and the governments they worked for – had much to lose. With free trade, we would be able to engage in world commerce and increase our wealth. In the tributary system, we must pay for the right to trade as if it were a privilege, quite possibly outweighing any benefit we receive from any exchange of goods.

But this situation was different to Americans in the sense that **independence** was **not** a privilege. It was a right that they fought for; it could not be borrowed, and it could not be bought. It was earned at Battles of Saratoga, at the Siege at Yorktown, and in the Snowy Encampments of Valley Forge. America gained its independence from Britain, and America had no plans whatsoever to surrender her liberty to any foreign power. Unfortunately, it took seventeen years from the capture of the *Betsey* in 1784 to the issuing of the Declarations of War in 1801, and later 1815 for the United States to wake up to that fact. But woke up she did, and after the two Barbary Wars ended thirty years later,<sup>xi</sup> America finally gained the recognition and independence she wanted, and as many see it, deserved.

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<sup>i</sup> Definitions taken from Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary at the following URLs:

Main Page: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>

Independence: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/independence>

Independent: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/independent>

Free: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/free>

<sup>ii</sup> Declaration of Independence. Source: [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html)

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.

<sup>v</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>vii</sup> The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World, p. 39

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid., p. 57

<sup>x</sup> Ibid., p. 60

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid., p. 201