

From the shores of Tripoli to the Tigris

Herald Tribune, March 17, 2008

'It was written in the Koran that all nations who should not have acknowledged (the Muslims') authority were sinners (and) that it was their right and duty to make war upon whoever they could.'

These words certainly sound familiar to anyone acquainted with Al Qaeda today. Yet they came as a shock to one of the first Americans to hear them: Thomas Jefferson.

The year was 1785 and Jefferson was negotiating with a representative from Tripoli which - along with the so-called Barbary States, Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria - was sending pirates to plunder American merchant ships and capture their crews.

Many Americans urged their government to follow the European practice of bribing the pirates, but Jefferson believed that paying off pirates would only encourage them. Peace in the Middle East, he concluded, was attainable solely "through the medium of war."

Jefferson's position would seem to prefigure that of George W. Bush, who, in the aftermath of 9/11, declared his determination to stand up to Middle Eastern terrorism. In fact, Jefferson would hardly be surprised to see modern U.S. troops fighting in the Middle East, protecting vital economic interests and promoting local democracy. America has pursued similar goals in the region for well over 200 years.

Yet in some ways, America's current policies represent a fundamental departure from this centuries-old tradition. Many of America's interests and objectives in the Middle East have remained consistent since Jefferson's day, but the means to attaining them have changed - as has the United States' status in the region.

Though it is now widely forgotten, America's first foreign war was fought in the Middle East. After trying and failing to form an international coalition against Barbary, Jefferson sent the U.S. Navy to battle the pirates in 1801.

American forces suffered many setbacks before 1805, when the Marines marched to "the shores of Tripoli" and defeated the enemy's army.

But Jefferson never ordered his troops to occupy the territory they conquered. And rather than crushing the Barbary States, he used the Marines' victory as a springboard for concluding a negotiated peace.

Later presidents followed Jefferson's example of military intervention. For example, in 1904, when a Moroccan bandit named Raisuli kidnapped American businessman Ion Perdicaris, Theodore Roosevelt sent battleships to the region with the instructions: "We want Perdicaris alive or Raisuli dead."

Forty years later, Franklin D. Roosevelt dispatched hundreds of thousands of American servicemen to fight Nazi forces in the Middle East, and during the Eisenhower administration in 1958, American soldiers landed in Beirut to support the beleaguered Lebanese government.

Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton both launched retaliatory action against the state supporters of Middle Eastern terrorism, and George H. W. Bush drove invading Iraqis from Kuwait.

In every case, however, American military action was seen as an ancillary to - rather than as a

substitute for - diplomacy. And in no case did U.S. troops remain on Middle Eastern soil longer than their missions required.

Economic interests have always played a prominent role in America's interaction with the Middle East. Centuries before California engineers struck oil in Saudi Arabia in 1938, the Middle East was a lucrative market for Americans.

In Jefferson's time, about 20 percent of America's exports were destined for Mediterranean ports where New World wheat and tobacco were exchanged for Middle Eastern figs and carpets. Commerce expanded rapidly in the 19th century, with the United States selling weaponry and manufactured goods to Middle Eastern countries. Ironically, America also became the Middle East's major supplier of oil.

It was not until World War II that the relationship reversed and Americans began consuming vast quantities of Persian Gulf oil. That reliance deepened until 1973, when an Arab oil embargo virtually paralyzed America's economy. Since then, America's purchase of Middle East oil has steadily decreased.

Nevertheless, the Middle East remains vital to the global economy and, through it, to America's financial well-being.

Yet the broadest field of America's interaction with the Middle East has been neither military nor commercial but rather ideological. Americans have long dreamed of liberating the Middle East.

Jefferson hoped that Middle Eastern despots would someday be replaced by liberty-loving farmers much like himself. The thousands of American missionaries who moved to the region in the 1800s, building its first modern universities, preached an "American Gospel" of patriotism, human rights and democracy.

Freedom for Middle Eastern peoples was a centerpiece of Woodrow Wilson's policies after World War I and of Roosevelt's in World War II, with the United States investing millions of dollars in Middle East development. Americans proceeded to play a pivotal role in winning independence for many Middle Eastern states, including Syria, Libya and Iran.

While championing self-determination for Middle Eastern nations, the United States also affirmed the right of the Jewish people to statehood in their biblical homeland.

In 1948, Harry Truman made the United States the first country to recognize the recreated State of Israel. Since then, though, every American administration has labored to restore peace to the Holy Land.

Fighting piracy and despotism, building schools and defending national rights - these have been the hallmarks of America's Middle East involvement. Yet today the United States is regarded throughout much of the area as the paragon of self-interest.

Desperate to maintain the flow of oil, America violated its own democratic principles by bolstering friendly Middle Eastern autocrats and undermining leaders who opposed American interests.

Denounced for its support for Israel and invasion of Iraq, the United States is widely perceived as having abandoned the Palestinians while introducing democracy by force. Indeed, the war in Iraq, and the 1991 Gulf War before it, is seen by many Middle Easterners not as crusades against tyranny but as money-grabs.

The United States now stands at a crossroads in its relationship with the Middle East. Though U.S. troops will eventually withdraw from Iraq, the persistence of terrorism will necessitate undiminished American vigilance, if not active intervention, in the area.

America's financiers will remain linked to Middle Eastern markets, and its statesmen will still strive to rid the region of oppression and ethnic strife. Achieving these goals, while regaining the inhabitants'

good will, is the great challenge facing America's leaders.

The task is gargantuan. To accomplish it, Americans must return to the traditions established by their forebears:

Use military might to defend basic interests but know when to cease fighting and negotiate.

Work to introduce American ideas to the region through educational means rather than at gunpoint.

Restore America's economic independence from the Middle East by developing alternative energy sources.

Support Israel but spare no effort to forge peace agreements between it and the Arab world.

Most importantly, heed the advice proffered by George McClellan, the former Union general and Middle East traveler, in 1874: Americans must learn to "weigh (the Middle East) by (its) own rules," McClellan warned, and not try to transform the region into a mirror of the United States. For "so long as we judge (it) by the rules we apply to ourselves," Americans will be doomed to misunderstand the region.

Presented with permission of author.