LESSON 5: BARBARY STATES CONFLICT

Student Handout 5: Outcomes

President Jefferson decided to order the American fleet to guard American ships and defend against pirate ships from Tripoli whenever they attacked (Option 4), as he did not have the authority to declare war. The limited power to fight only defensively was frustrating to American sailors and leaders. In 1802, Jefferson succeeded in getting Congress to pass a law authorizing the president to use all means necessary to defeat Tripoli. Thereafter, American ships set up a blockade of Tripoli and sought out and destroyed Tripolitan ships (Option 3). Jefferson was happy about the decision, because he believed that Tripoli was the right kind of enemy—it was weak enough that America would appear strong. He said, “We could never have a weaker foe or a better cause.” American ships won several spectacular victories over Tripolitan ships, so things started out well. Curiously, when Jefferson sent the navy across the ocean to fight, he also cut the naval budget (Option 7). He was concerned that spending on the military would be a threat to American democracy. He was especially worried that a large war would cause the government to gain too much power over the American people. So he wanted to avoid a declaration of war and an all-out war.

The blockade was ineffective for the first year. The American ships were too large to go into shallow water, so the smaller Tripolitan pirate ships could slip through the blockade by staying in shallow water close to land. Also, the initial American naval commander was not consistent in enforcing the blockade. For example, he pulled ships off the blockade for other duties. Jefferson replaced the commander of the American fleet in 1803. The new commander, Edward Preble, tightened the blockade and attacked Tripoli itself.

Unfortunately, in 1804, the American warship U.S.S. Philadelphia ran aground off the coast of Tripoli. The ship and the whole crew of 300 men were captured by the pirates. The 300 prisoners were taken off the ship. Jefferson was widely criticized for cutting the naval budget and mishandling the war. But then, knowing that he couldn’t get the ship out of the harbor, American naval officer Stephen Decatur led a crew of sailors who snuck into the harbor in Tripoli and destroyed the Philadelphia; it was better that it be destroyed than used for Tripoli’s gain. The daring attack stirred patriotic emotions in the U.S. The tightened blockade and attacks continued into 1805. American ships destroyed many buildings in Tripoli, and American-led
forces, including U.S. marines under the command of William Eaton, made a legendary overland march for hundreds of miles through the desert and captured one of Tripoli’s cities. The cost to the U.S. for the blockade and fighting, however, had increased from $500,000 in 1801 to $1.5 million in 1804. The leader of Tripoli was much weaker—he had lost one city and had his capita damaged. He agreed to a treaty agreement with the Americans. The U.S. paid him only $60,000 for the 300 prisoners (his original demand was $450,000), and Americans informed him that they would pay no more annual tribute to protect their ships. European countries were paying hundreds of thousands of dollars in tribute at this time; the U.S. agreement was much more favorable. America had forced recognition of free navigation.

On the other hand, many Americans felt the U.S. should have finished the attack and ended Barbary piracy for good. The Senate could not refuse the treaty agreement, since the money had already been paid and the American prisoners had returned to the United States. But senators asked why the U.S. had not continued fighting Tripoli when America was so close to victory. The treaty was extremely unpopular in the U.S. Moreover, Barbary pirates once again started capturing American ships in 1806, despite the treaty.

Historians, like Federalists and Republicans at the time, are divided on Jefferson’s decision making from 1801 to 1805. Some believe he fought the war poorly and was lucky that Stephen Decatur made his daring attack, which made the war seem more worthwhile to the public. Other historians note that the war against Tripoli made the U.S. look strong in the world, earning greater respect among European powers. The U.S. may not have won an outright victory, but America showed that it could and would fight for its interests. A great patriotism arose from the Barbary Wars, including patriotic songs such as the “Marines’ Hymn” (“From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli...”). The war with Tripoli is also regarded as “the nursery of the Navy.” The officers who fought there under Edward Preble, known as “Preble’s Boys,” learned battle techniques that helped the U.S. effectively fight the British navy in the War of 1812.