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While most historians of United States (U.S.) foreign relations focus primarily on the twentieth century, the body of foreign relations scholarship on the Barbary Wars in particular remains small in comparison to other subjects. There has been a twenty-first century revival of interest in the Barbary Wars, but many of these books—with the exception of Frank Lambert’s excellent *The Barbary Wars*—troublingly and anachronistically frame the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century U.S. wars against the Barbary pirates as the opening salvos of the post-9/11 War on Terror. However, Jason Zeledon’s well-researched work offers a refreshing reinterpretation of the subject and examines the Barbary Wars on their own terms. Zeledon’s article “‘As Proud as Lucifer’: A Tunisian Diplomat in Thomas Jefferson’s America,” demonstrates the strength and promise of his scholarship. This article identifies and analyzes an important historical episode that other scholars have overlooked: the 1805 diplomatic visit of Tunisian Ambassador Sidi Soliman Mellimelli to the United States. As the article points out, this was an important moment of contingency for the Thomas Jefferson Administration and for U.S. relations with Tunis. Zeledon claims that

1 Frank Lambert’s study examines the various conflicts that constituted the Barbary Wars through economic, political, and cultural lenses. His book provided a corrective to those that characterized the Barbary Wars as evidence of a ‘clash of cultures’ between the U.S. and the Islamic world. Instead, he argued that the United States’ battles with the pirate states of North Africa represented an economic rather than a religious conflict and should be seen as an extension of the early U.S. efforts to defend its independence. Frank Lambert, *The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005). For books that problematically positioned the Barbary Wars as the advent of the War on Terror, many of which are trade books, see Frederick C. Leiner, *The End of Barbary Terror: America’s 1815 War Against the Pirates of North Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Richard Scott, *Jihad at Sea: The Barbary War: America’s First Encounter with Radical Islam* (N.p.: Winter Island Press, 2016); David Smethurst, *Tripoli: The United States’ First War on Terror* (N.p.: Independently Published, 2017); and Joseph Wheelan, *Jefferson’s War: America’s First War on Terror 1801-1805* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 2003). Most other books on the Barbary Wars focus on the founding of the U.S. Navy and/or Marines. See, for example, Gregory Fremont-Barnes, *The Wars of the Barbary Pirates: To the Shores of Tripoli: The Rise of the US Navy and Marines* (Oxford: Osprey, 2006).
Jefferson’s decision to host the Ambassador at the United States’ expense represented both a great political risk for the President and, ultimately, a diplomatic failure.

To tell this story Zeledon relies upon a close analysis of U.S. diplomatic records, American newspapers, and diaries and memoirs of American elites and British visitors. Given the difficulty of obtaining Tunisian sources from this period, Zeledon does a remarkable job of using the available sources to trace Mellimelli’s visit and recount his engagement with the U.S. government and public. As Zeledon explains, “Collectively, these overlooked sources reveal a spectrum of opinions about the Tunisian ambassador and a consensus that his trip had enormous political and diplomatic significance” (15). His article moves back and forth between the diplomatic narrative of Mellimelli’s visit and a discussion of the ways in which American political leaders, urban elites, British diplomats in the U.S., and the broader American public responded to and characterized Mellimelli and Jefferson’s decision to host the Ambassador.

The diplomatic encounter, as Zeledon notes, “was straightforward” (158). Ambassador Mellimelli sought to settle a dispute between his government and the U.S. over three Tunisian ships captured by the U.S. Navy and to negotiate a peace treaty with the United States. Since the Ambassador’s visit came on the heels of the Tripolitan War, in which the U.S. prevailed, President Jefferson desired peace with Tunis and hoped to avoid paying tribute to the Tunisian pirate state as the nations of Europe had done. The practice of paying ransom for captured sailors and tribute to the pirate states of North Africa was more than the fledgling United States’ treasury could bear; moreover, such a practice did not sit well with the majority of Americans. It was a matter of national honor that the United States not pay tribute to anyone, let alone states which most Americans characterized as inhabited by lawless ‘barbarians.’ Controversially, Jefferson chose to pay Mellimelli’s expenses as a gesture of goodwill. After several rounds of tense negotiations, the Mellimelli mission ultimately failed. The Jefferson Administration and the Ambassador were unable to agree on terms for a peace treaty, and the two sides clashed over the issues of tribute and compensation for the three Tunisian ships that the U.S. had seized. Mellimelli returned to Tunis after ten months in the United States without a reduction in diplomatic tensions.

In the wake of this failed mission, Zeledon uncovers a stunning revelation that previous scholars have apparently missed. While Jefferson insisted in his negotiations with Mellimelli that the U.S. would not pay tribute to Tunis, in the end, he avoided a second war in the Mediterranean by doing precisely that. He then concealed this payment from public disclosure. After the failure of the Mellimelli mission, the American diplomat Tobias Lear successfully negotiated a peace treaty with the Bey of Tunis by agreeing to pay the Tunisians $10,000 in compensation for their three ships. Zeledon reasons that, since Mellimelli had indicated that the three ships were worth only $4,000 during his visit to the United States, “One can reasonably consider this extra $6,000 as tribute” (181). When Jefferson later announced the Tunisian peace treaty to Congress and the American public, he did not mention his $10,000 payment to Tunis. Zeledon interprets this as a deliberate omission, one meant to avoid a “political landmine,” since the 1808 presidential election loomed on the horizon (181).

Beyond uncovering this “well-executed cover-up,” Zeledon’s article also contributes to the literature on early American understandings of the Islamic world by analyzing U.S. political and media debates about Mellimelli (182). Using race, religion, and gender as lenses of analysis, Zeledon reveals conflicting American responses to the Tunisian diplomat. Political leaders and newspapers were highly critical of the mission, and their criticism only grew stronger the longer Mellimelli remained in the United States. Jefferson broke with established American practice by hosting a representative from the Barbary States and by paying for his visit. Federalist
political leaders and newspaper editors of course sought to use the Mellimelli mission to their political advantage by criticizing Jefferson’s use of public funds to host the Ambassador in opulent style—a total bill that eventually ran into the tens of thousands of dollars—by arguing that such a decision was both fiscally irresponsible and a national embarrassment that debased the U.S. Surprisingly, Democratic-Republicans were also often critical of both Jefferson’s decisions and Mellimelli for the same reasons.

The criticism of the Ambassador himself reveal much about early American attitudes about Muslims. Mellimelli was the first diplomatic envoy from North Africa to visit the United States and so contributed to Americans’ first encounters with Islam. As Zeledon explains, critical U.S. newspaper articles about the Ambassador at the time often used race, gender, and religion to make sense of the exotic Tunisian. Thus, newspapers often drew attention to Mellimelli’s skin color, alternately characterizing it as “yellow” or black (157). As Zeledon points out, newspaper articles also often drew upon Orientalist themes when they focused on Mellimelli’s opulent dress and depicted him as effeminate and sex-crazed. These gendered depictions of the Ambassador also drew upon the notion that Islam was a religion of degeneracy, licentiousness, and the mistreatment of women. In characterizing Mellimelli in these ways, Zeledon claims that American newspapers and political elites used race, gender, and religion to depict the Tunisian diplomat as inferior and Jefferson’s approach to his visit as misguided.

However, Zeledon also explains that Americans’ views of Mellimelli were not monolithic. The same Congressmen who opposed his diplomatic mission—fifteen senators walked out of Congress in protest when Mellimelli appeared there in January 1806—later feted and dined with the Tunisian during his tour of northern cities a few months later. Playing host to Mellimelli in Boston and New York suddenly became a marker of prestige for political elites. Some other members of the elite who met the ambassador during his tour wrote of him in positive terms, characterizing him as intelligent, entertaining, and generous. The American public was even more positive in its response to the Tunisian; crowds of people flocked to see Mellimelli in every city he visited. Zeledon thus concludes that the public’s view of Mellimelli, and by extension of Jefferson’s engagement with him, was less critical than that of the elites, although he perhaps overlooks the fact that the throngs may have been attracted by their curiosity about the exotic and that they still may have harbored racial, religious, or gendered prejudices against the Ambassador and of Muslims more generally.

The strengths of this article are many. Zeledon offers novel insight into this little known diplomatic episode and advances sensitive analysis of his impressive source base to contribute to scholars’ growing understanding of the United States’ first encounters with Islamic states. My criticisms are fairly minor. First, the article would be even stronger with the inclusion of more contextual discussion, which would put it more directly into conversation with scholarship on other aspects of the United States’ early encounters with Islam and Muslims. For instance, it would be helpful to know about Americans’ views of Islam in general during the

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period of the early republic, which would situate their discussions of Islam in relation to Mellimelli. In Zeledon’s discussions of race, it would also have helped to compare Americans’ racializing of Mellimelli with Americans’ views of race in relation to other Muslims they discussed or encountered during the same period. Allan Austin, for instance, has shown how Americans ascribed shifting racial identities to enslaved African Muslims in the antebellum U.S. When they encountered proud, literate, monotheistic enslaved African men, some Americans chose to claim that such men were actually Arabs who had been enslaved by mistake rather than confront their own preconceptions about black Africans. Such a discussion would help to illustrate the broader applicability of the slipperiness of race when Americans in the early nineteenth century discussed Muslim peoples.

Finally, Zeledon could do even more to underscore the broader significance of the Mellimelli mission and of his overarching argument. In the end, he asserts that despite the fact that the Mellimelli mission “utterly failed,” and that there was bipartisan political criticism of Jefferson’s treatment of the Tunisian, the episode remarkably “did not result in any lasting repercussions” (182). In fact, Zeledon himself sides with Jefferson’s critics and quite reasonably concludes that “hosting Mellimelli and his entourage at public expense amounts to a gargantuan waste of public funds–Jefferson could have achieved peace at a fraction of the cost by paying compensation for the three captured ships in the first place” (182). However, if the episode did not result in lasting harm to Jefferson’s political position, and Jefferson eventually concluded a peace treaty with Tunis anyway, one is left to wonder about the broader historical significance of Zeledon’s research and claims. His article implicitly demonstrates that this episode illustrates the broader inconsistencies in U.S. policy toward the Barbary States and of the conflicting and sometimes tendentious ways in which Americans grappled with their first diplomatic and military encounters with Islamic countries. One can also assume that the public discourse about Mellimelli which Zeledon deconstructs and analyzes so well also made a lasting impression on the broader early American understanding of Islam and Muslims. The author could, however, have been bolder and more explicit in demonstrating the significance of his insightful research. Undoubtedly, this well-researched and engagingly written article is an important contribution to historical knowledge about this period of initial U.S. engagement with the Islamic world.

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