

**Abigail G. Mullen**, *To Fix a National Character: The United States in the First Barbary War 1800-1805*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024, pp. 256.

In *To Fix a National Character: The United States in the First Barbary War, 1800-1805*, Abigail G. Mullen reexamines the early nineteenth-century conflict between the United States and the Barbary States of North Africa, arguing that the First Barbary War was a defining moment in the formation of American national identity. Derived from Mullen's 2017 PhD dissertation, the book asserts that the war was not merely a military engagement but a critical step in the United States' efforts to assert itself on the global stage.

After the American Revolution, the United States lost the protection of the British navy, leaving its maritime trade vulnerable to piracy from the Barbary States – Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, and Morocco. While European powers paid tribute or signed treaties to avoid conflict, this was financially unsustainable for the fledgling nation. In 1801, Tripoli declared war on the United States. Mullen suggests that the subsequent military and diplomatic responses were part of a larger process aimed at entering the Mediterranean community and securing recognition as

an equal member of the Euro-Mediterranean world. Mullen argues that the true significance of the conflict lies in the diplomatic and cultural interactions between the United States and the European Mediterranean powers, rather than in the military victory – a victory that, as the author acknowledges, was not entirely clear (p. 9, p. 184). Mullen's book is organized into seven chapters, each offering a detailed exploration of various aspects of the war, its impact, and the key individuals involved. The first chapter, "A Carrier for a Pirate," is a brief introduction that sets the stage for the war, using the term "pirate" thematically to highlight early nineteenth-century perceptions of the Barbary States. Although this chapter is short, it functions as a prologue, focusing on pre-war conditions and the context in which the conflict began. The subsequent chapters delve deeper into American diplomatic and military efforts, drawing on a wide array of primary sources, including naval records, consular documents, and personal correspondence. Mullen examines the roles of American consuls and commodores, emphasizing how their diplomatic skills and relationships with European counterparts were pivotal to the war's outcome. Each chapter balances historical narrative with analysis, providing a nuanced view of how these individuals navigated complex international relations in the absence of a strong federal presence.

Mullen's research methodology combines military and diplomatic sources to offer a comprehensive view of the war. She situates the conflict within the broader geopolitical landscape, analyzing not only the American experience but also the interactions and perceptions between American officials and Mediterranean powers. This approach emphasizes the importance of diplomacy in shaping early U.S. foreign policy, illustrating how these interactions helped establish the United States as a global power despite its military limitations – and offers multiple insights into the contemporary context, particularly when compared with current American unilateralism in international relations.

Mullen's primary contribution lies in her argument that the First Barbary War was central to the formation of American national identity, particularly through the lens of foreign diplomacy. Her work challenges the traditional interpretations of the war, which have often focused on its military aspects (see notes 13-14, pp. 7-8, and 29, p. 76), by highlighting the significance of diplomatic and cultural interactions. Mullen contends that the conflict served as a means for the United States to establish its place in the Mediterranean world and assert its national character in the face of European powers.

Through a detailed examination of the roles played by consuls, commodores, and politicians, Mullen underscores the complexity of U.S. diplomatic and military strategies. These efforts, often conducted in

the absence of federal intervention, reveal tensions between American ideals of independence and the practical realities of international diplomacy. The book's focus on American exceptionalism and moral superiority – traits that became integral to the U.S. national identity and are a critical aspect of Mullen's analysis – shows how these beliefs were reinforced during the war and continued to shape the nation's self-image. One of the book's most significant contributions is its re-evaluation of the war's outcome. While the United States technically won the war, the lasting impact on American foreign policy was more ambiguous. Mullen's work demonstrates that European nations, for the most part, continued to view the United States as a lesser power, and the Barbary States maintained their demands for tribute well into the following decade.

Mullen's meticulous examination of American naval records, consular documents, and personal letters forms the backbone of the book. By focusing on these sources, she offers a fresh perspective on the First Barbary War, examining early American diplomacy and military strategy through a new lens. This extensive use of primary sources adds depth and credibility to her analysis, ensuring that her arguments are firmly grounded in historical evidence. Mullen's thorough research in American archives enhances the historical narrative and provides an invaluable resource for future scholars. Her careful integration of these materials, combined with well-documented citations, ensures that the book stands as a reliable reference, especially with the initial notes on sources that enable readers to trace her work and the emphasis on material published online.

Mullen's command of naval terminology is impressive, and her ability to explain life at sea is commendable (pp. 142-143). Despite the technical language, her narrative remains accessible, helping readers understand complex military operations and the naval landscape of the period – even though some may find the extensive use of naval jargon and the large number of military figures overwhelming. While the book clearly targets an academic audience interested in naval history, this depth of detail may challenge those less familiar with early American naval operations (pp. 137-139). Mullen mitigates this by summarizing key points at the end of each chapter and sub-chapter, effectively guiding readers through the text. Her meticulous attention to detail, though a major strength, can at times obscure the broader narrative as the focus on individual officers and naval operations manoeuvres occasionally creates a 'maze' of names and events that requires careful rereading. Nevertheless, this precision is characteristic of a dissertation-turned-book: it reflects scholarly rigor while remaining accessible to non-specialists through well-placed clarifications and summaries that bridge potential gaps in understanding.

Mullen's writing is another strength of the book. Her style is clear, engaging, and accessible, allowing complex historical arguments to be understood without sacrificing scholarly rigor. Her interdisciplinary approach, blending political science, cultural studies, and history, allows for a nuanced analysis of the war. This approach provides a fresh and comprehensive perspective on the First Barbary War, highlighting the interconnectedness of military, diplomatic, and cultural factors.

The book's historical analysis of the conflict's broader international implications is somewhat limited. While Mullen does discuss the United States' attempt to enter the Mediterranean world and gain recognition from European powers, she misses an opportunity to delve deeper into the impact of European imperialism and British influence on the Barbary States (p. 98). A more thorough examination of the British naval strategy in the Mediterranean would have added important context to the war's international significance. On this account, although Mullen's research is solid, certain important works are noticeably absent: the first is Caitlin Gale's dissertation *Beyond Corsairs: The British-Barbary Relationship during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars* (2016) in which she examines the relationship between Great Britain and the Barbary Regencies, highlighting the role that diplomacy, commerce, and trade played in that relationship over the course of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. The second is Julie Kalman's *The Kings of Algiers* (2023), a much more recent book on the role of bankers Bacri and Busnach than the quoted Rosenstock's article of 1952 (n. 94, p. 89). These sources could have provided additional context and insight into the broader geopolitical dynamics during the period. Furthermore, Mullen's decision to rely almost exclusively on American sources raises some questions. For example, her analysis of diplomatic tensions between the United States and the European nations would have benefited from more engagement with European diplomatic records (p. 122).

The final major critique to the book is its limited scope, particularly the absence of a Mediterranean perspective. Mullen relies primarily on American sources, which means that the values and viewpoints of the Mediterranean powers – especially the Barbary States – are underexplored. The book misses an opportunity to address broader historical contexts, such as the systems of slavery and captivity in the Mediterranean, which could have enriched the analysis. This omission overlooks an important historiographical trend that Mullen appears not to know well, as suggested by the notable absence of authors such as Salvatore Bono and Ann Thomson who have written extensively on this topic. *To Fix a National Character* is a thoughtful and well-researched contribution

to the study of early American history. Mullen successfully reframes the First Barbary War as a crucial moment in the construction of American national identity. While the book's narrow focus on American sources and perspectives may limit its historical scope, Mullen's detailed analysis and engaging writing style make it an essential work for anyone interested in the development of American foreign policy and nationalism.

The book is particularly valuable for scholars and students of early American history, U.S. foreign relations, and national identity. However, for those seeking a broader geopolitical analysis, the book's focus on American perspectives may leave some questions unanswered. Despite these limitations, Mullen's work provides a fresh and valuable perspective on a pivotal moment in U.S. history.

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