Ghosts of terror wars past?

Crime, terror and America’s first clash with the Saracen hordes

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Abstract. In the wake of 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan, then of Iraq, with all the talk of a renewed Clash of Civilizations, came a revival of interest in the lessons from what seemed to be the direct antecedent, namely the Barbary Wars of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. At that time, too, America had seemed to be forced to defend itself economically and militarily against a fanatical foe which rationalized crimes in the name of religion to wage terror against innocents. There are indeed close analogies between the two; but they are almost exactly the opposite of what much popular (and some official) belief holds true. If today it has become clear that most justifications for the current Terror War were fabrications intended to cloak other agendas at home and abroad, when the Barbary Wars are subjected to serious scrutiny, much the same forces advancing much the same agendas appear at work. Nor are the “politics of fear” new in American history. During the Barbary Wars, carefully cultivated fears of a rising Islamintern served to: divert public attention from domestic political problems; suppress political dissent; provide cover for regressive fiscal changes; cloak offensive militarism in defensive guise; and ride roughshod over both conventions of international diplomacy and normal standards of criminal justice, all rationalized by a sense of Christian mission.

America was under attack: its citizens murdered or held hostage abroad; its overseas economic lifeline threatened; even its flag desecrated by camel-jockeys with rags around their heads who envied its freedoms and coveted its wealth.

Back home there were appeasers aplenty willing to buy a shameful peace at a price far in excess of 30 pieces of silver. But fortunately there were also political visionaries who knew the importance of standing tall before this axis of evil, and of rejuvenating the armed might that had been allowed to decay following a long struggle for the country’s very existence against a superpower foe.

Incidentally, they also knew how to turn a crisis, real or contrived, into an opportunity to advance an agenda by a few neat but dramatic twists to the truth. In so doing they could rally the nation around a common threat, puff the military budget, expand central government authority, suppress internal dissent, and defend the profitability of American business abroad, all with the vocal blessings of the country’s religious leaders, while simultaneously assuring that the costs fell on the poorer sections of the population through fiscal manipulation in the name of patriotism. No doubt they acted, too, in the
certainty that contemporary pamphleteers and future historians alike would approve, applaud and cover up. Familiar though all this sounds, it took place not at the beginning of the 21st century but at the end of the 18th.¹

Seeking redemption

Those who played political midwife to the new country in 1776 had a daunting task. Colonists who had thrown off British rule were in no mood to concede instruments of potential coercion to local leaders. Furthermore, for some of the former colonies, their less-than-perfect-union during the rebellion had been a wartime expedient en route to full independence. The British exploited the disunity, negotiating peace, not with the Continental Congress, but with each ex-colony individually, while trying to tempt some back to the old flag. Against such obstacles, the would-be founding fathers knew that to build a real country, there were two urgent requirements (apart from instilling in the people a common sense of mission) – stable revenues for the central government and a permanent military force, the first a prerequisite to the second. From that moment forward, financial power and military might would complement each other in America’s march across a continental and a world stage.

Yet when the foundations of both were being set in place, the overwhelming share of the (non-slave) population lived in largely self-sufficient farm-based communities for whom standing armies and permanent navies were of marginal interest, even anathema. And after a Revolution with the stirring motto of “no taxation without representation,” it was doubly hard to impose the required taxes. In 1787, Daniel Shays, a veteran officer of the Revolution, led disaffected citizens of Massachusetts in a revolt against heavy taxes and high official salaries. It was only the first. Although in 1789 the federal government created the infrastructure to collect federal Customs revenues and, two years later, agreed to assume state debts in exchange for states concurring in internal taxes, particularly on recreational alcohol, in 1794 resentment on the frontier over the fact that the new tax hit whiskey (which local farmers drank) more than wine (which eastern urbanites preferred) helped to precipitate a new uprising. Faced with a threat to both the public finances and federal authority, President George Washington ordered in almost as many troops as had fought in the Revolution.² Thus, the emerging U.S. Army found its first major task, not slaughtering Indians in the West or conquering Hispanic territories in the South or gobbling up remaining British colonies in the North, but enforcing a new tax code. America had its first War on Crime – a War on Terror would follow shortly. Under orders from John Adams, the second president, the army had to repeat the job in 1797 – this time the rebellion was