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<b>14. ABSTRACT</b>  For decades, historians have debated the contradictory appearance of President Jefferson's naval policies and strategy. As U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary to France and Secretary of State, for instance, Jefferson was an outspoken advocate for a establishing an American Navy to safeguard maritime commerce. Yet, Jefferson's first-term approaches to naval administration and appetite for parsimonious coastal defense measures is often considered antinavy. However, much of the evidence used to argue that Jefferson was averse to establishing a navy comes from a narrow chronological window. Moreover, the marshalling of such evidence fails to recognize the global security environment and the centrality of maritime commerce as key factors in Jefferson's understanding of the navy and naval diplomacy. Consequentially, the centrality of maritime commerce and the influence of the international "half-time" created by the end of the Quasi War and the Peace of Amiens are new contributions to the debate surrounding Jefferson's use of naval power, particularly as it relates to Jefferson's first-term use of the U.S. Navy in the Mediterranean. These two factors help resolve existing interpretations of Jefferson's thinking about the navy.						
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RESOLVING THE ENIGMA

THOMAS JEFFERSON AND THE NAVY RECONSIDERED, 1774-1807

## Introduction

President Thomas Jefferson's thinking about the navy and the use of naval power is the subject of continued debate. At first glance, his naval policies appear contradictory. He was the Commander-in-Chief under which much of the fledgling United States Navy created by his predecessors was largely dismantled. Indeed, his notable approaches to naval administration—conceptualizing the mothball fleet, building the Washington Navy Yard, and introducing dry docks—were viewed by some as antinaval. Similarly, his desire to avoid U.S. entanglement in the global warfare of the period eventually led to the pursuit of an untested and parsimonious coastal defense policy using gunboats that many believed was negligent and strategically inept. At the same time, however, Jefferson was an outspoken advocate for the establishment of a navy. For instance, he was the driving force behind some of the most famous long-range deployments in early American military and naval history. As one classic account put it, the Marines who “courageously marched through the Libyan desert, defeated the Tripolitan army near *Derne*, and...for the first time spread the American eagle in Africa, on the ramparts of a Tripolitan fort”<sup>1</sup> were doing so on Jefferson's orders. The apparent tension and duality between Jefferson's pro-navy and antinavy beliefs and actions present historians with a conundrum not easily explained. In other words, as the Sprouts put it nearly a century ago, Jefferson's “attitude toward the Navy remains something of an enigma.”<sup>2</sup>

In the decades since, historians have proposed several ways to resolve these contradictions, yet as this essay will show, the existing explanations are incomplete. Specifically,

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<sup>1</sup> Dudley W. Knox, ed., *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers, Volume V* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1935–1938), 545. As a reward, Congress, at the behest of President Jefferson, awarded each of the three leaders of the Tripoli expedition a thousand acres.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, *The Rise of American Naval Power: 1776–1918* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1933), 53.

historians have failed to recognize that Jefferson cultivated a firm support for the establishment and use of a professional American navy throughout his long political career that this author expresses as the *centrality of maritime commerce*. Maritime commerce was essential not only to the nation's economy, but also to its nationhood. Without the ability to conduct trade on the sea, the U.S. could never fully realize its independence. Only when this belief intersected with the post-Quasi War (1797–1801) global security environment created by the Convention of Mortefontaine (1801) and Peace of Amiens (1801–1803) did Jefferson finally have an unobstructed opportunity to demonstrate his understanding of naval power and naval strategy. He deployed U.S. naval forces against the Barbary States—Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli. This essay examines Jefferson's decision to deploy the U.S. Navy to the Mediterranean against North African maritime marauders to erase confusion about Jefferson's first-term naval policies and to reconsider his importance in charting the course of future U.S. naval diplomacy. While much has been written about Thomas Jefferson, the Barbary States, and the First Barbary War, none of this literature connects holistic considerations of Jefferson's professional career to the centrality of maritime commerce and the global security environment.<sup>3</sup>

### Literature Review

Existing explanations of Jefferson's first-term naval policy focus on domestic politics, finances, and political philosophy. For instance, in his doctoral dissertation turned published book, *Navalists and Antinavalists*, renowned naval historian Craig Symonds postulated that Jefferson's parsimonious naval policies might have simply been devised for domestic political

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<sup>3</sup> As a disclaimer, this paper is not an exhaustive and comprehensive examination of the First Barbary War. Readers of history desiring a more detailed historical examination of the First Barbary War should seek out a tome exclusively devoted to the subject. There are many fine options available, including Frank Lambert, *The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005) and Glenn Tucker, *Dawn Like Thunder: The Barbary Wars and the Birth of the U.S. Navy* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1963).

reasons to placate Republican antinavalists.<sup>4</sup> Antinavalists were “those who favored reliance on a militia navy founded on the minuteman concept,” while navalists were “proponents of a regular professional navy on the European model.”<sup>5</sup> Symonds reiterated his contention that domestic politics influenced naval policy in his concise history of the U.S. Navy: “Federalists in the lame duck Congress rushed through the Peace Establishment Act before Jefferson took office in March 1801...to preempt [Jefferson] from abolishing the navy altogether.”<sup>6</sup> The Peace Establishment Act of 1801 “reduced the navy to thirteen frigates, only six of which were to be kept on active duty. The numbers of smaller men-of-war were left to the discretion of the new President; he could keep whatever he pleased or do away with the lot. The bill also shrank the officer corps. Nine of twenty eight captains were retained, 28 of 110 lieutenants, and 159 of 344 midshipmen.”<sup>7</sup> Jefferson himself identified domestic political influence as an important element of naval policy formation while recollecting a conversation with fellow Senator Gouverneur Morris on February 17, 1801, the day Jefferson was elected President. Jefferson recalled that Gouverneur Morris explained to him why many states were so worried about his victory: “[T]hey apprehended that, (1) I would turn all Federalists out of office; (2) put down the navy; (3) wipe off the public debt.”<sup>8</sup> Morris implored him to promise not to take these steps, reflecting pervasive Federalist concerns. After all, Jefferson had made no secret of his intention to reduce the navy “to the legal establishment” during the election campaign.<sup>9</sup> At one point, Jefferson even opined

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<sup>4</sup> Craig L. Symonds, *Navalists and Antinavalists: The Naval Policy Debate in the United States, 1785–1827* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1980), 103–09.

<sup>5</sup> Craig L. Symonds, “Navalists and Antinavalists: The Naval Policy Debate in the United States, 1785–1827” (University of Florida Dissertations Publishing, 1976), vii, accessed 2 August 2022, ProQuest.

<sup>6</sup> Craig L. Symonds, *The U.S. Navy: A Concise History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 18.

<sup>7</sup> George C. Doughan, *If By Sea: The Forging of the American Navy – From the American Revolution to the War of 1812* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 344.

<sup>8</sup> Frank Donovan, *Thomas Jefferson Papers* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1963), 175–76.

<sup>9</sup> Donovan, *Jefferson Papers*, 178.

that “it might be better for us to abandon the ocean altogether...to leave to others to bring what we shall want, and to carry what we can spare.”<sup>10</sup>

Domestic politics was not the only antinaval influence upon Jefferson. George C. Daughan contends that Jefferson’s view of “war as the ultimate scourge of mankind” motivated a “peaceful coercion” strategy manifesting in coastal defense as a cost-saving measure.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, conservative fiscal beliefs are often cited as a principal determinant of Jefferson’s first-term naval gunboat policy since it reflects his aversion to the national debt. In his book, *For the Purposes of Defense*, Gene Smith highlights this understanding when he argues that Jefferson was “obsessed with debt reduction because of his personal situation as well as his observations of debt-ridden Virginia....The gunboats’ perceived economic benefits strongly appealed to Jefferson, Republican congressmen, and a country whose resources were extremely meager.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Jefferson surrounded himself with advisors possessing similar conservative beliefs, namely Albert Gallatin, the Secretary of the Treasury, whose encouragement of Jefferson to avoid naval expansion was born from shared parsimonious designs.<sup>13</sup> Spencer Tucker echoes Gene Smith’s analysis when he asserts that Jefferson’s view of gunboats as “cheaper than Ships” coincided with his 1799 support for a “naval force only as may protect our coasts and harbors from such depredations as we have experienced.”<sup>14</sup> That gunboats were a “political rather than professional” creation designed to avoid militarization and reduce expenditure simultaneously is

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth B. Moss, *Marque and Reprisal: The Spheres of Public and Private Warfare* (Lawrence, KA: University Press of Kansas, 2019), 210.

<sup>11</sup> Doughan, *If By Sea*, 352.

<sup>12</sup> Gene Allen Smith, “*For the Purposes of Defense*”: *The Politics of the Jeffersonian Gunboat Program* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1995), 10–11.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Defense*, 11; Thomas Jefferson, December 8, 1801, “Annual Message,” *The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes, Federal Edition*, Collected and Edited by Paul Leicester Ford, [http://www.loc.gov/resource/mtj1.025\\_0179\\_0186](http://www.loc.gov/resource/mtj1.025_0179_0186), accessed 2 March 2022.

<sup>14</sup> Spencer C. Tucker, *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 1; 11. See also Julia H. Macleod, “Jefferson and the Navy: A Defense,” *Huntington Library Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (February 1945): 174.

evident in correspondence between James Madison and Thomas Jefferson on March 14, 1794.<sup>15</sup> The former, commenting on the War Department's inflated budget, supported Jefferson's belief that forces within the government exploited "the old trick of turning every contingency into a resource for accumulating force in the government."<sup>16</sup> N.A.M. Rodger argues that Jefferson "believed fervently that armies and navies were 'pillars of corruption', destructive of the political purity of the Republic, and that 'gun-boats are the only water defense which can be useful to us, and protect us from the ruinous folly of a navy.'"<sup>17</sup> Likewise, Ian Toll, Kenneth B. Moss, and Gene Smith point to Jefferson's support of local and state militias as the genesis of Jefferson's naval gunboats strategy. To that end, Gene Smith argues that "Jefferson planned for the gunboats to be manned by a naval militia, which would spring to arms at the appearance of enemy sails."<sup>18</sup> Symonds supports this claim, writing that "Jefferson's faith in the value of the militia was an important element... [since] he believed that the nation would respond with a renewal of the Spirit of '76."<sup>19</sup>

This essay does not dispute the contention that domestic political concerns, fiscal conservatism, or enthusiasm for militias are necessary to explain Jefferson's naval policy; rather, it contends that they are insufficient. Specifically, we need a more holistic understanding of Jefferson's views of naval power. As we have seen, the same term that saw Jefferson step into

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<sup>15</sup> N.A.M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain 1649–1815* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 424.

<sup>16</sup> Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783–1802* (New York: Free Press, 1975), 175.

<sup>17</sup> Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, 424; Smith, *Defense*, 3. "Pillars of corruption" is a term often ascribed to Thomas Jefferson, although it very likely originated from Albert Gallatin, who sought to generate consensus about Republican "party dogma" and fiscal conservatism relating to the repayment of "debt, taxes, wars, armies, and navies." The misconception about who uttered the words "pillars of corruption" further reinforces the understanding that Jefferson has often been misinterpreted, especially concerning his views on the navy. See Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America: During the First Administration of Thomas Jefferson Volume I* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1889), 162; 238–239.

<sup>18</sup> Gene Allen Smith, "A Means to An End: Gunboats and Thomas Jefferson's Theory of Defense," *The American Neptune* 55, no. 2 (1995): 115.

<sup>19</sup> Symonds, *Navalists and Antinavalists*, 109.

office as a threat to the Navy's very existence also saw him deploy the Navy across the Atlantic more aggressively than any of his predecessors. Much of the evidence used to portray Jefferson as antinavy comes from a narrow chronological window. In fact, as this essay will show at length, in the 1780s, Jefferson sang a different tune to that of the 1790s. He wrote to John Jay in 1785 that the protection of American commerce would occur through "frequent war" at sea, and that the development of a navy was of vital importance since it is the "only weapon with which we can reach an enemy."<sup>20</sup> The United States, Jefferson argued, should therefore quickly marshal the resources to constitute a naval force.<sup>21</sup> Even during his first inaugural address on March 4, 1801, Jefferson spoke about the importance of overseas commerce, and by implication, of the protection of overseas commerce. He envisioned the U.S. as "a rising nation spread over a wide & fruitful land, traversing all the seas with the rich productions of their industry, engaged in commerce with nations."<sup>22</sup> In other words, as author James Sofka writes, Jefferson regarded maritime commerce as both the "measure and medium of state power."<sup>23</sup>

A more congruent explanation of Jefferson's naval policy emerges when the full scope of his domestic and international political experience and leadership is considered. The "golden thread" tying Jefferson together with seemingly disparate international events leading to the employment of the U.S. Navy during the First Barbary War is the centrality of maritime

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<sup>20</sup> Jefferson to John Jay, 23 August 1785, Founders Online, National Archives, accessed 3 August 2022, <https://founders.archives.gov/?q=%20Author%3A%22Jefferson%2C%20Thomas%22%20Frequent%20wars%2C%20without%20a%20doubt%20will%20be%20violated%20on%20the%20sea&s=1511311111&r=1&sr=>. All subsequent Jefferson letters from Founders Online, National Archives, will conform to the following convention: NARA FO JP.

<sup>21</sup> Jefferson to John Jay, 23 August 1785, NARA FO JP. See also James R Sofka, "The Jeffersonian Idea of National Security: Commerce, the Atlantic Balance of Power, and the Barbary War, 1786–1805," *Diplomatic History* 21, no. 4 (1997): 529.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Jefferson, March 4, 1801, "Draft of First Inaugural," in *The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes, Federal Edition*, collected and edited by Paul Leicester Ford, [http://www.loc.gov/resource/mtj1.023\\_0059\\_0071](http://www.loc.gov/resource/mtj1.023_0059_0071), accessed 2 March 2022.

<sup>23</sup> Sofka, "The Jeffersonian Idea of National Security," 519.

commerce. Jefferson thought the ability of a nation to conduct maritime commerce was a natural right compelling the creation of a navy since “the sea is the field on which we should meet an...enemy.”<sup>24</sup> Jefferson Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution—to *provide and maintain a Navy*—is an extension of Jefferson’s belief that “vigorous exertion of [our] own force” is sometimes necessary to safeguard free trade and commerce from tyranny and subjugation.<sup>25</sup>

The Declaration of Independence, Jefferson’s most gratifying accomplishment, provides significant insight into his conviction about the centrality of maritime commerce. Drafted during the second Continental Congress and adopted on July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was *the* first distant salvo of the Tripolitan War. Like the “volley of musquetry” shot from the U.S. schooner *Enterprise* at the Tripolitan corsair, *Tripoli*, on August 1, 1801, the abhorrence of “Despotism...[and] cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world” stressed in the Declaration of Independence was an attack on foreign attempts to suppress American commerce.<sup>26</sup>

Jefferson’s steadfast determination to defend the right to free trade from foreign interference formed a lifelong pursuit spanning his time as U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary to France, Secretary of State, Vice President, and President.

A pro-navy and antinavy construct is the theoretical framework through which Jefferson’s decision to employ the U.S. Navy against the Barbary States during his first term is explained. Part I, *The Foundation of Pro-Navy Belief*, spans 1774–1794, and focuses on

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<sup>24</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia, PA: R.T. Rawle, 1801), 345. See also Joseph P. Slaughter, “Genesis of the US Navy, 1785–1806,” in *America, Sea Power, and the World*, edited by James C. Bradford (Hoboken, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2016), 27, 36–41, who uses the section title of “Commerce Navy, 1801–1805: The Tripolitan War” to describe the U.S. Navy under the first Jefferson administration.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Jefferson, 1794, “A Summary View of the Rights of British America: Set Forth in Some Resolutions Intended for the Inspection of the Present Delegates of the People of Virginia, Now in Convention,” <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbc0001.2003jeff16823/?st=gallery>, accessed 2 August 2022.

<sup>26</sup> See Frank Lambert, *The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 128–29 and Knox, ed., *Barbary Powers, Volume I*, 538 concerning “volley of musquetry.” See also *The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States of America*.

Jefferson's service as U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary to France and Secretary of State to President George Washington. This section argues that Jefferson was a consistent advocate for the establishment and use of a professional American navy from the American Revolution through his time as Secretary of State. Part II, *The Political Practicality of Antinavy Belief (1794–1801)*, argues that Jefferson was outwardly averse to establishing a navy as vice president to placate the Republican Party but inwardly held firm to pro-navy beliefs formed during the previous two decades. Part III, *Pro-Navy Beliefs Operationalized*, explains Jefferson's 1801 decision to deploy the U.S. Navy against the Barbary States as a function of the centrality of maritime commerce and the global security environment. The centrality of maritime commerce and the influence of the international "half-time" created by the end of the Quasi War and the Peace of Amiens are new contributions to the debate surrounding Jefferson's use of naval power. These two factors help resolve existing interpretations of Jefferson's thinking about the navy and use of naval power, and more specifically Jefferson's first-term use of the U.S. Navy in the Mediterranean.

### **Part I – The Foundation of Pro-Navy Belief (1774–1794)**

In May 1784, Congress appointed Thomas Jefferson to succeed Benjamin Franklin as the U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary to France. Jefferson's education, training, and experience made him well-suited to represent American interests in France, a country of near mythical status to Jefferson due to his political and legal sensibilities. Jefferson quickly embraced French culture and *mode de vie*, writing to Abigail Adams on June 21, 1785, "I do love this *people* with all my heart, and think that with a better religion and a better form of government and their present governors their condition and country would be most enviable."<sup>27</sup> Similarly, on September 30, 1785, Jefferson praised the virtues of French mores, writing, "Here it seems that a man might

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<sup>27</sup> Jefferson to Abigail Adams, 21 June 1785, NARA FO JP.

pass a life without encountering a single rudeness. In the pleasures of the table they are far before us, because with good taste they unite temperance....Were I to proceed to tell you how much I enjoy their architecture, sculpture, painting, music, I should want words.”<sup>28</sup> This admiration of French customs and courtesies foreshadowed irreconcilable differences of opinion between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams concerning American diplomatic relations with France and the Barbary States in the Mediterranean.

In appointing Jefferson U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary to France, Congress instructed him to formalize peace through “Treaties of Amity and Commerce with the Commercial Powers of Europe...[and]... Morocco and the regencies of Algiers, Tunis and Tripoly.”<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, *A Summary of View of Rights of British America*, written by Jefferson ten years earlier, served as the intellectual framework through which Congress and Jefferson approached diplomacy to secure and protect American self-determination through trade and commerce. The words trade and commerce appear no less than sixteen times in *A Summary of View of Rights of British America*, with Jefferson writing, “the exercise of a free trade with all parts of the world...[is a]...natural right,” and the subjugation of commerce to an arbitrary power is “insolent and cruel mockery.”<sup>30</sup> Most likely drafted by Jefferson himself, Congressional instructions to Jefferson in 1784 reflected Jefferson’s language from a decade earlier. For instance, Congress directed Jefferson to gain assurances of unmolested commerce during war, stipulating that “neither of the contracting powers shall grant or issue any Commission to any private Armed Vessels

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<sup>28</sup> Jefferson to Charles Bellini, 30 September 1785, NARA FO JP.

<sup>29</sup> United States Congress, “Enclosure III: Instructions to the Commissioners for Negotiating Treaties of Amity and Commerce, 7 May 1784,” NARA FO JP. See also William Sterne Randall, *Thomas Jefferson* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993), 363 and Lambert, *The Barbary Wars*, 51.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas Jefferson, 1774, “A Summary View of the Rights of British America: Set Forth in Some Resolutions Intended for the Inspection of the Present Delegates of the People of Virginia, Now in Convention,” <https://www.loc.gov/resource/rbc0001.2003jeff16823/?st=gallery>, accessed 21 June 2022.

empowering them to take or destroy such trading Ships or interrupt such Commerce.”<sup>31</sup> This *Free Ships, Free Goods* conviction was the backbone of Jefferson’s 1774 criticism of British rule. Moreover, this conviction formed the philosophical underpinnings of his belief in trade and commerce during his time as U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary to France and throughout the entirety of his political career.

The use of naval power and naval diplomacy to safeguard American commerce overseas was impressed upon Jefferson through his close observation and negotiations with European countries and the Barbary States. U.S. commercial success and resolve in the wake of the American Revolution alarmed established powers who sought to weaken American influence in foreign markets. For example, Britain sought to prevent the U.S. from accessing profitable overseas markets through exorbitant tariffs, maritime interdiction and impressment, and strict application of seventeenth-century Navigation Acts promoting mercantilism.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, Britain and other European countries such as France, Spain, and Portugal did little to prevent Barbary pirates from harassing American merchants because they each had bilateral arrangements with the Barbary States.<sup>33</sup> The Moroccan seizure of the U.S. brigantine *Betsey* on October 11, 1784, and the Algerine capture of the U.S. schooner *Maria* and ship *Dauphin* on July 25 and 30, 1785, respectively, demonstrated the precarious state of American independence and overseas commerce that presented a choice between paying tribute to the Barbary States or using force to protect U.S. merchant ships.<sup>34</sup> Jefferson understood this choice well, explaining to Congress on November 11, 1784, that negotiating with the Barbary States was not like negotiating with

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<sup>31</sup> United States Congress, “Enclosure III,” NARA FO JP.

<sup>32</sup> Lambert, *The Barbary Wars*, 15–26. See also Ian W. Toll, *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 21, who argues “a leading objective of America’s post-revolutionary foreign policy was to secure access to new export markets.”

<sup>33</sup> Lambert, *The Barbary Wars*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> Knox, ed., *Barbary Powers, Volume I*, 36.

European countries. Not only did the U.S. and European nations have to pay for the costs of negotiations, but the Barbary States demanded large annual tributes. “The contributions under which they thus lay the powers of Europe are as heavy as they are degrading. . . . Presents or war is their usual alternative.”<sup>35</sup>

Over time, Jefferson formulated an opinion concerning the use of naval force as the sole means to safeguard American trade and commerce against the Barbary States. In other words, Jefferson viewed American trade and commerce in the Mediterranean and the development of a navy as inseparable.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, in a November 11, 1784, letter to James Monroe, Jefferson wrote, “We ought to begin a naval power, if we mean to carry on our own commerce Can we begin it on a more honourable occasion or with a weaker foe? I am of opinion Paul Jones with half a dozen frigates would totally destroy their commerce: not by attempting bombardments as the Mediterranean states do wherein they act against the whole Barbary force brought to a point, but by constant cruising and cutting them to peices by peicemeal [sic].”<sup>37</sup> Jefferson’s anticipation that the Barbary States would demand tribute for access to Mediterranean ports led him to postulate proposing reciprocal treaties of equal value with the promise of war as the cost of refusal.<sup>38</sup> In correspondence with Nathanael Greene on January 12, 1786, Jefferson communicated his disgust at the idea of paying tribute to the Barbary States for “freedom of navigation in the European seas,” stating, “when this idea comes across my mind, my faculties are absolutely suspended between indignation and impotence.”<sup>39</sup> Likewise, in a July 11, 1786 letter to John Adams, the U.S. Minister to England, Jefferson reiterated his penchant for

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<sup>35</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “American Commissioners to the President of Congress, 11 November 1784,” NARA FO JP.

<sup>36</sup> Knox, ed., *Barbary Powers, Volume I*, iii.

<sup>37</sup> Jefferson to James Monroe, 11 November 1784, NARA FO JP.

<sup>38</sup> Jefferson to James Monroe, 11 November 1784, NARA FO JP.

<sup>39</sup> Jefferson to Nathanael Greene, 12 January 178[6], NARA FO JP.

procuring peace with the Barbary States through “the medium of war,” justifying naval force through a six-element argument:

1. Justice is in favor of this opinion.
2. Honor favors it.
3. It will procure us respect in Europe; and respect is a safeguard to interest.
4. It will arm the federal head with the safest of all the instruments of coercion over its delinquent members, and prevent it from using what would be less safe...
5. I think it least expensive.
6. Equally effectual.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, Jefferson envisioned a fleet of 150 guns spread over some number of ships. Half of it, he thought optimistically, could be “in constant cruise.”<sup>41</sup> He estimated it would cost £450,000 to build it and £45,000 per year to maintain it. “Were we to charge all this to the Algerine war, it would amount to little more than we must pay, if we buy peace.”<sup>42</sup>

Despite his strong position in support of naval force to secure American commerce in the Mediterranean, Jefferson dutifully completed one of his principal duties as U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary to France, a Treaty of Peace and Friendship with Morocco, signed in June 1786, which cost the U.S. only a one-time tribute of \$20,000.<sup>43</sup> However, Jefferson’s strong belief concerning naval power as a fundamental means of securing American commerce was well-established as he transitioned to his new role as Secretary of State in the Washington administration.

Jefferson’s confirmation as the first U.S. Secretary of State on March 22, 1790, vaulted him from the dominion of regionally focused diplomacy into the sphere of global politics. However, the views and opinions he formed as U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary to France concerning the use of naval power to secure American commerce against the Barbary States

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<sup>40</sup> Knox, ed., *Barbary Powers, Volume I*, 10.

<sup>41</sup> Knox, ed., *Barbary Powers, Volume I*, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Knox, ed., *Barbary Powers, Volume I*, 10.

<sup>43</sup> Lambert, *The Barbary Wars*, 59–60.

continued to intensify. Writing to President Washington from Paris on July 12, 1790, Jefferson quickly established a hard line in dealing with the Barbary States. His previous interactions and negotiations with the Barbary States solidified his belief that paying tribute and ransom was an interminable charade subjugating free trade to the fickle whims of rogue Mediterranean nations comprised of pirates and privateers. Cognizant of the unreliable assurances of European maritime security for American shipping, Jefferson wrote, “The Congress can then flatter themselves by force only, to obtain peace with [the Barbary States], & now is the time to make use of it; for if the Portuguese should cease to guard the straight [sic] of Gibraltar with the same care and success, the Vessels of the United States could not without great danger even approach the coasts of Europe.”<sup>44</sup> In arguing for military action, Jefferson advanced his belief in the importance of striking “a great blow... either to destroy the Barbary corsairs, or to cruise in the Levant... From the Vernal equinox to the end of June” with a fleet of “three Frigates” stationed “on the coasts of Spain, Provence, Italy or Barbary according to the information they may have.”<sup>45</sup> Jefferson echoed similar sentiments in a December 20, 1790, *Report on American Trade in the Mediterranean*, informing Congress that “Our Navigation then into the Mediterranean has not been resumed... The sole Obstacle has been the unprovoked War of Algiers; and the sole Remedy must be to bring that War to an End... [Our shipping] must all enter at a Streight [sic] only five Leagues wide, so that [Barbary] Cruisers... may very effectually inspect whatever enters it.”<sup>46</sup>

Jefferson’s geopolitical astuteness extended beyond simple awareness of geographical constraints and military topography into a comprehensive understanding of European

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<sup>44</sup> Jefferson to George Washington, 12 July 1790, NARA FO JP.

<sup>45</sup> Jefferson to George Washington, 12 July 1790, NARA FO JP.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Report on American Trade in the Mediterranean, 28 December 1790,” NARA FO JP.

belligerency with the Barbary States. In the concluding paragraphs of his December 1790 report, Jefferson specified that the “[Barbary States] are in Peace, at present, with France, Spain, England, Venice, the United Netherlands, Sweden, and Denmark: and at War with Russia, Austria, Portugal, Naples, Sardinia, Genoa, and Malta.”<sup>47</sup> The maintenance of such awareness through vigorous correspondence, political dispatches, and periodical review equipped Jefferson with a firm appreciation for American ability and opportunity to establish and sustain free trade and commerce in the Mediterranean within the context of an ever-evolving global security environment.

Like a festering sore, Jefferson’s concern about Barbary piracy and maritime deprivations plagued him throughout his tenure as Secretary of State. His belief that peace was best obtained by war—“That is to say by constant cruizes [sic] in the Mediterranean”—grew from regular disruptions in Mediterranean supply chains he acknowledged on several occasions.<sup>48</sup> For example, in a November 6, 1792, letter to his friend and former agent in Marseilles, Stephen Calhoun, Jr., Jefferson wrote, “I fear the apprehensions of the Barbary cruisers will lessen much the supplies you might otherwise have recieved [sic] from our plentiful harvest.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, the Algerine capture of 11 U.S. ships, brigs, and schooners between October and November 1793 further entrenched Jefferson’s opinion that “The liberation of our citizens has an intimate connexion [sic] with the liberation of our commerce in the Mediterranean... The distresses of both proceed from the same cause, and the measures which shall be adopted for the relief of the one, may, very probably, involve the relief of the other.”<sup>50</sup> It

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Report on American Trade in the Mediterranean, 28 December 1790,” NARA FO JP.

<sup>48</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Considerations on Policy toward Algiers, 1 April 1792,” NARA FO JP.

<sup>49</sup> Jefferson to Stephen Calhoun, Jr., 6 November 1792, NARA FO JP. See also Toll, *Six Frigates*, 25 who writes, “By the mid-1780s, 100 American ships and 1,200 American sailors carried 20,000 tons of sugar, flour, rice, salted fish, and lumber to ports in the Mediterranean each year, returning with cargoes of wine, lemons, oranges, figs, opium, and olive oil.”

<sup>50</sup> Knox, ed., *Barbary Powers, Volume I*, 22, 55–56.

is doubtless Jefferson gained a certain amount of pleasure in informing John Paul Jones on June 1, 1792, of his appointment to serve as Commissioner to treat with Algiers due to Jefferson's long-held belief that John Paul Jones could crush North African piracy and privateers with a modest fleet.<sup>51</sup>

In contrast to Jefferson's documented faith in a fleet of American frigates safeguarding maritime commercial interests abroad, he made strikingly little reference to gunboats in official correspondence as both U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary to France and Secretary of State. While it remains unclear "when or where Jefferson conceived the idea of using gunboats," his belief in the importance of an American Navy safeguarding commerce is clearly traced to his 1781 *Notes on the State of Virginia*, in which he proposed an American fleet of "30 ships, 18 of which might be of the line, and 12 frigates."<sup>52</sup> Initial recognition of Jefferson's absence of thought concerning gunboats during the first nine years of his professional diplomatic career seemingly does little to repudiate existing explanations of Jefferson's first-term naval policy. However, closer consideration reveals a consistency of thought revolving around the centrality of maritime commerce that was clearly aligned with the global security environment. In fact, Jefferson's zealous support for the use of naval force to defeat Barbary piracy and secure American commerce in the Mediterranean was integral to the Naval Act of 1794 and the establishment of the U.S. Navy despite his departure from the Department of State on December 31, 1793.<sup>53</sup> Jefferson's succeeding three-year absence from political office provided him time to reassess geopolitical developments that some argue was the impetus for evolutionary thought concerning

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<sup>51</sup> See Knox, ed., *Barbary Powers, Volume I*, 36, concerning the appointment of John Paul Jones. See Jefferson to James Monroe, 11 November 1784, NARA FO JP, concerning "half a dozen frigates..."

<sup>52</sup> See Smith, *Defense*, 11 concerning the "idea of using gunboats." See Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Philadelphia, PA: R.T. Rawle, 1801), 345, regarding "30 ships."

<sup>53</sup> Tucker, *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy*, 11. See also Toll, *Six Frigates*, 43 for a discussion of An Act to Provide a Naval Armament.

the navy. While Jefferson's political practicalities were responsible for an outward shift toward antinavy perspectives as a means to gain popular domestic political support, he inwardly maintained principled adherence to earlier established views concerning commerce and the navy espoused in *A Summary of View of Rights of British America*, the Declaration of Independence, and *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Jefferson expressed as much to Enoch Edwards on the eve of his last day as Secretary of State, writing, "I believe we shall endeavor to do ourselves justice in a peaceable and rightful way. We wish to have nothing to do in the present [Algerine] war; but if it is to be forced upon us, I am happy to see in the countenances of all but our paper men a mind ready made up to meet it unwillingly indeed, but perfectly without fear."<sup>54</sup> This steadfast commitment to confronting despotism and threats to American commerce, especially in the Mediterranean, would stay with Jefferson during a tumultuous vice presidency marked by a deep political divide between the Federalist and Republican parties.

## **Part II – The Political Practicality of Antinavy Belief (1794–1801)**

Three years following his departure from political office, Jefferson was once again at the center of American politics, this time as vice president following a bitter 1796 election in which he was defeated by John Adams in a slim electoral margin. Jefferson's election loss to Adams thrust Jefferson "into the inelegant position of acting simultaneously as vice president and leader of the [Republican] opposition."<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the hotly contested election set the stage for an adversarial administration greatly divided by the Quasi War and further complicated by the conspicuously meddlesome Alexander Hamilton.<sup>56</sup>

Spanning the terms of three U.S. presidents, the Quasi War was an undeclared naval war

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<sup>54</sup> Jefferson to Enoch Edwards, 30 December 1793, NARA FO JP.

<sup>55</sup> Toll, *Six Frigates*, 64.

<sup>56</sup> Alexander DeConde, *The Quasi War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France 1797–1801* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 17.

fought between the U.S. and the French Republic. Rising geopolitical tensions during the Washington administration and unsuccessful diplomacy early in the Adams administration exacerbated conflicting American and French foreign policy objectives that precipitated open hostilities starting in 1798. The infamous XYZ Affair, the Directory's aspirations for a New World empire in Spanish Louisiana and Florida, and French *guerre de course* in American territorial waters and the Caribbean created the *mise-en-scène* for triumphant American naval victories and political in-fighting.<sup>57</sup> Diametrically opposed views concerning American relations with revolutionary France pitted Adams and Jefferson in a political tug of war with geopolitical ramifications. Essentially, Jefferson supported French demands for U.S. aid against the British as required by the June 6, 1778, Treaties of Alliance, while Adams sought to continue his predecessor's pro-British foreign policy as codified in the Jay Treaty of 1794. As president, Adams was left with three options in response to increasing French attacks on American commerce. He could negotiate, prepare for war, or request Congress to place an embargo on American shipping to the Caribbean and French ports.<sup>58</sup> It is with this global security environment in mind that Jefferson wrote on January 4, 1797, shortly before Adams' inauguration in March, that "should the British faction attempt to urge [Adams] to the war by addresses of support with life and fortune, as may happen, it would then be adviseable [sic] to

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<sup>57</sup> The Quasi War was preceded by fierce political debate surrounding The Neutrality Act of 1794, the Jay Treaty (1794), and the abrogation of the 1778 Treaties of Alliance. Significant U.S. naval victories included: *USS Constellation* victory over the *L'Insurgente* on 9 February 1799; *USS Constitution* recapturing U.S. sloop *Neutrality* on 27 March 1799; *USS Constellation* victory over *La Vengeance* on 1 February 1800; *USS Enterprise* victory over *Flambeau* on 25 October 1800; *USS Experiment* capture of *Deux Amix* on 1 September 1800. See Gardner W. Allen, *Our Naval War with France* (New York: The Riverside Press, 1909); Alexander DeConde, *The Quasi War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France 1797–1801* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966); Michael A. Palmer, *Stoddert's War: Naval Operations During the Quasi War with France 1798–1801* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1987). See also Slaughter, "Genesis of the US Navy, 1785–1806," 30, who states, "French privateers captured 316 American merchant ships in 1795 alone, while over the next two years the French government increased its restrictions on American trade and French privateers expanded their operations from the Caribbean to include the coast of North America."

<sup>58</sup> DeConde, *The Quasi War*, 17.

counteract their endeavors by dissuasive addresses.”<sup>59</sup> A central means of “dissuasive addresses” was for Jefferson to orchestrate public denunciations of the Adams administration’s maritime policy while privately holding firm to his previously established belief in the centrality of maritime commerce and American naval power.

Jefferson’s political acumen and professional maturity informed his conduct and correspondence as vice president. Keenly aware of his unharmonious responsibilities as vice president and leader of the Republican Party, he walked a fine line between loyalty to his country and loyalty to his party. Jefferson, for instance, demonstrated fealty to the U.S. and Adams administration when he wrote President Adams on May 24, 1797, “While we are endeavoring to adjust our differences with the French republic, by amicable negotiation, the progress of the war in Europe, the depredations on our commerce, the personal injuries to our citizens, and the general complexion of affairs, prove to us your vigilant care, in recommending to our attention effectual measures of defence [sic].”<sup>60</sup> Yet, at the same time, he consciously steered clear of statements in support of the opposition that political opponents or the press could use against him. He acknowledged this in a June 13, 1797, letter to John Moody, writing, “The liberties which the presses take in mutilating whatever they can get hold of, obliges me to request every gentleman to whom I write to take care that nothing from me may be put within their power.”<sup>61</sup> And, to Arron Burr in January 1799, Jefferson laconically wrote, “A want of confidence in our posts prevents my saying any thing on political subjects.”<sup>62</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Jefferson’s Francophile tendencies and domestic political affiliation led to disagreement with Adams’ support of naval armament and the April 30, 1798, establishment

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<sup>59</sup> Jefferson to Archibald Stuart, 4 January 1797, NARA FO JP.

<sup>60</sup> Jefferson to John Adams, 24 May 1797, NARA FO JP.

<sup>61</sup> Jefferson to John Moody, 13 June 1797, NARA FO JP.

<sup>62</sup> Jefferson to Aaron Burr, 7 January 1799, NARA FO JP.

of the Navy Department. Indeed, on many occasions as vice president, Jefferson wrote about the expense associated with building and maintaining the U.S. Navy. Two possibilities exist to explain Jefferson's heretofore uncharacteristic resistance to the navy. Either he completely changed long-held beliefs about the consequence of naval power first published in 1781 or he was placating his political base. A July 20, 1800, letter to James Madison indicates he was more than likely conforming to the latter. In the letter, Jefferson conveyed a July 4, 1800, dinner toast in support of the U.S. Navy at a celebratory festival that Jefferson read about in the *Raleigh Register* nearly a week after the fact. Offered by an unnamed person, the toast was an enthusiastic and patriotic endorsement of the U.S. Navy: "the Navy of the US. the benefits [sic] which have arisen from it's [sic] infant efforts is a just presage of it's [sic] future greatness & usefulness."<sup>63</sup> Jefferson's lack of derisive commentary about the toast demonstrates a discerning consistency in Jefferson's beliefs about naval policy revolving around the centrality of maritime commerce. While his diplomatic experience justified the importance of a U.S. Navy to protect American commerce, he concomitantly eschewed the potential for unrestrained spending which could lead to conflict with established maritime nations.<sup>64</sup> In essence, Jefferson was completely at ease utilizing the U.S. Navy against the Barbary States but utterly opposed to a direct maritime conflict with France and other global maritime powers.<sup>65</sup>

Although Jefferson largely shifted his focus from foreign policy to domestic political matters during his time as vice president, he still devoted a significant amount of time to

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<sup>63</sup> Jefferson to James Madison, 20 July 1800, NARA FO JP.

<sup>64</sup> Randall, *Thomas Jefferson*, 560.

<sup>65</sup> Jefferson to James Madison, 22 January 1797, NARA FO JP. In this letter, Jefferson explains his opposition to war with France, stating, "I sincerely deplore the situation of our affairs with France. War with them and consequent alliance with Great Britain will completely compass the object of the Executive from the commencement of the war between France & England, taken up by some of them from that moment, by others more latterly. I still however hope it will be avoided." See also Jefferson to Horatio Gates, 30 May 1797, NARA FO JP. In this letter, Jefferson underscores his desire to avoid "disastrous war."

advocating for American security and prosperity through maritime commerce. His experience and understanding of international affairs, born from his earlier service as U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary to France and Secretary of State, informed his belief that geopolitical realities necessitated diplomatic nuance. In this sense, his desire for peace with France during the Quasi War was perfectly aligned with thought concerning the security of American commerce overseas. His June 14, 1797, insistence to make “commerce and navigation...the instruments of preserving peace and justice” aligns with previous truculent statements made in 1784 concerning the use of force to safeguard maritime interests in the Mediterranean.<sup>66</sup> And, while he dealt little with the Barbary States and international affairs as vice president, he understood that American “commerce & navigation generally are in a state of prostration” due to maritime adversaries impeding the flow of U.S. goods and services overseas.<sup>67</sup> His opinion that the “advantages of [American] commerce...may be made the engine [of peace]” portended his “desire for a modest blue-water force” to ensure American bloodshed in defiance of British tyranny during the Revolutionary War was not in vain.<sup>68</sup> Jefferson’s frequent communication with Samuel Smith in early 1801 is illustrative. Although a Republican, Smith’s original Federalist Party affiliation allowed him to marshal bipartisan support for contentious issues, including the navy, for which Jefferson requested he serve as Secretary of the Navy. Without a political chameleon like Smith, Jefferson said he “must abandon from necessity...the expectation of procuring to our country such benefits as may compensate the expences [sic] of their navy.”<sup>69</sup> In other words, Jefferson intended to use the navy and needed Smith’s help.

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<sup>66</sup> Jefferson to Edward Stevens, 14 June 1797, NARA FO JP.

<sup>67</sup> Jefferson to Martha Jefferson Randolph, 21 January 1800, NARA FO JP.

<sup>68</sup> Jefferson to Peregrine Fitzhugh, 23 February 1798, NARA FO JP, regarding “advantages of [American] commerce; See Smith, *Defense*, 8 regarding “blue-water.”

<sup>69</sup> Jefferson to Samuel Smith, 9 March 1801, NARA FO JP.

This understanding refutes the commonly accepted belief that Jefferson completely adopted antinavy beliefs. The day following his election to the Presidency on the 36<sup>th</sup> ballot, Jefferson wrote to his fellow revolutionary William Jackson that “one imputation in particular has been repeated till it seems as if some at least believed it: that I am an enemy to commerce.”<sup>70</sup> Moreover, Jefferson wanted his discontent kept hidden, requesting of Jackson in the same letter, to “consider the communication so far confidential as not to put it in the power of any person [to commit] it to the press.”<sup>71</sup> From this and previous requests for confidentiality, it seems Jefferson was more interested in assuming the Presidency with a benevolent reputation untarnished by rumor or requital than he was in completely refashioning himself the leading voice of an antinavy movement. He desired freedom of choice unshackled from promises of reciprocity like the one Gouverneur Morris tried extracting on the day of Jefferson’s election to the Presidency.

### **Part III – Pro-Navy Beliefs Operationalized (1801)**

The union of Thomas Jefferson’s election as the third U.S. President and the post-Quasi War global security environment created by the Convention of Mortefontaine and Peace of Amiens produced a salient through which Jefferson operationalized his long-held beliefs about American commerce and self-determination. Although temporary, the Peace of Amiens was a significant event in world history that ended the French Revolutionary Wars (1792–1801) and provided an interval of reconciliation during which Great Britain and France recuperated from the previous decade of conflict. Jefferson’s assertive employment of the U.S. Navy during this interval capitalized upon the relative lull in global affairs to proactively defend maritime commerce. This realization has dodged historians too preoccupied with impeaching Jefferson’s first-term coastal defense strategy, the *Chesapeake-Leopard Affair*, and the Embargo Act of

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<sup>70</sup> Jefferson to William Jackson, 18 February 1801, NARA FO JP.

<sup>71</sup> Jefferson to William Jackson, 18 February 1801, NARA FO JP.

1807. Yet, Jefferson's first inaugural address on March 4, 1801, foreshadowed his commitment as President to safeguard American independence and commerce through naval power. He declared his intention to use the government to promote "Peace, commerce, & honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none."<sup>72</sup> To that end, Jefferson's decision on May 20, 1801, to deploy an American Mediterranean Squadron against the Barbary States represents a rich part of early nineteenth-century history previously uncultivated as it relates to the context of the French Revolutionary Wars and peace relations between the U.S. and Europe. Jefferson's pro-navy views were certainly on display when he directed Captain Richard Dale to lead three frigates and one schooner in a mission to "protect our commerce...by sinking, burning, or destroying [Barbary] ships & Vessels wherever you should find them."<sup>73</sup> Jefferson's thinking, writing, and decision-making during the seven months between the signing of the Quasi War-ending Convention of Mortefontaine in Paris on October 1, 1800, and his May 21, 1801, letter to the Pasha of Tripoli, Yusuf Karamanli, demonstrates that Jefferson's use of U.S. naval force against the Barbary States resulted from an astute understanding of global events. These events commingled to create a window of opportunity supporting Jefferson's pledge to achieve "peace at home, & safety abroad."<sup>74</sup>

Coinciding with the War of the Second Coalition (1798–1801), the Quasi War was nestled under a larger umbrella of the French Revolutionary Wars and directly involved America in a military chess match between Britain and France. Ongoing European conflict made Napoleon Bonaparte eager for peace which U.S. peace emissaries Oliver Ellsworth, William R.

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<sup>72</sup> Thomas Jefferson, March 4, 1801, Draft of First Inaugural, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes*. Federal Edition. Collected and Edited by Paul Leicester Ford. [http://www.loc.gov/resource/mtj1.023\\_0059\\_0071](http://www.loc.gov/resource/mtj1.023_0059_0071), accessed 27 June 2022.

<sup>73</sup> Knox, ed., *Barbary Powers, Volume I*, 467.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas Jefferson, March 4, 1801, Draft of First Inaugural, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes*. Federal Edition. Collected and Edited by Paul Leicester Ford. [http://www.loc.gov/resource/mtj1.023\\_0059\\_0071](http://www.loc.gov/resource/mtj1.023_0059_0071), accessed 27 June 2022.

Davie, and William Vans Murray exploited to reestablish “a firm, inviolable, and universal peace” between the U.S. and France that was codified in Article I of the Convention of Mortefontaine.<sup>75</sup> Napoleon’s respect for American maritime success in the Caribbean and his “recognition of [France’s] naval limitations following...defeats at the hands of the Royal Navy,” particularly at the Battle of the Nile in August 1798, caused him to seek an end to hostilities between the U.S. and France.<sup>76</sup> Jefferson communicated his awareness of the October 1, 1800, signing of the Convention of Mortefontaine nearly a dozen times following William Davie’s return to the U.S. on December 11, 1800. Writing to John Hoopes on February 3, 1801, the day of Senate ratification, Jefferson stated, “I have the pleasure to inform you that the Senate this day determined to reconsider their vote rejecting the French convention, & have ratified it on condition of striking out the 2d. article & adding a limitation of 8. years for it’s [sic] duration; modifications which I hope will pr[...] no difficulty with France; and I trust we are now placed on [smoother] water with that country.”<sup>77</sup>

The end of the Quasi War was followed in quick succession by several significant global events culminating in the Peace of Amiens between Britain and France. Chief among these events was the Peace of Luneville, between Austria and France, which helped to mollify longstanding European hostilities by allowing France to pursue peace with other nations.<sup>78</sup> Jefferson understood this well, and acknowledged recognition of Luneville two days following his inauguration as President in a letter to Thomas Mann Randolph, writing, “I will inclose [sic] a paper just recieved [sic] giving the details of an armistice between France & Austria, a second

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<sup>75</sup> DeConde, *The Quasi War*, 224, 352.

<sup>76</sup> Alexander Mikaberidze, *The Napoleonic Wars: A Global History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 67.

<sup>77</sup> Jefferson to John Hoopes, 3 February 1801, NARA FO JP.

<sup>78</sup> Mikaberidze, *The Napoleonic Wars*, 111.

great victory.”<sup>79</sup> The exact paper to which Jefferson referred is lost. However, several newspapers carried foreign intelligence about the Treaty at Luneville that Jefferson would have undoubtedly followed.<sup>80</sup> Notwithstanding the brief May–June 1801 conflict between Spain and France known as the War of Oranges, “so called for a branch of an orange tree that the Spanish generalissimo had sent to the queen of Spain as proof of his victory,” the Peace of Luneville presaged widespread European peace, which Jefferson explicitly recognized as the vehicle to assert American principles proactively.<sup>81</sup>

Jefferson believed that American self-determination and prosperity through maritime commerce were inextricably linked with diplomatic and military autonomy unrestricted by foreign assistance or meddling. First professed in his December 20, 1790, *Report on American Trade in the Mediterranean*, Jefferson reiterated this belief on multiple occasions during the first month of his Presidency. In a letter to Thomas Paine on March 18, 1801, Jefferson wrote, “we shall avoid implicating ourselves with the powers of Europe... They have so many other interests different from ours, that we must avoid being entangled in them... We believe we can enforce [American] principles as to ourselves.”<sup>82</sup> Similarly, in a March 19, 1801, letter to Madame de Tessé, a salon holder and longtime acquaintance, Jefferson conveyed how “the convulsions of Europe have agitated even this country.”<sup>83</sup> Equally important, Jefferson acknowledged how English “overtures for treating separately [with France]” was an occasion to celebrate “a continent at peace in Europe” due to the “change of ministry in England.”<sup>84</sup> Jefferson’s cause for

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<sup>79</sup> Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph, 6 March 1801, NARA FO JP.

<sup>80</sup> *Gazette of the United States and Daily Advertiser*, December 3, 1800; *The National Intelligencer and Washington Advertiser*, December 8, 1800.

<sup>81</sup> Mikaberidze, *The Napoleonic Wars*, 125.

<sup>82</sup> Jefferson to Thomas Paine, 18 March 1801, NARA FO JP.

<sup>83</sup> Jefferson to Madame de Tessé, 19 March 1801, NARA FO JP.

<sup>84</sup> Jefferson to Thomas Newton, 23 March 1801, NARA FO JP, concerning “overtures;” See Jefferson to Enoch Edwards, 30 March 1801, NARA FO JP, concerning “a continent at peace” and “change of ministry.”

celebration was the election of Henry Addington as British Prime Minister on February 8, 1801, since Addington's election was "a strong proof to [Jefferson] that [the British] also are for peace. The attitudes of the maritime powers furnishes a ground of hope that something favorable to neutral rights be established."<sup>85</sup> Jefferson's enthusiasm stemmed from Addington's marquee foreign policy achievement, the Peace of Amiens, which formally ended the French Revolutionary Wars and heralded a "spirit of compromise."<sup>86</sup> Fresh European desire for compromise alleviated Jefferson's concerns about a negative foreign response to unilateral American naval activity in the Mediterranean. In short, Jefferson was free to utilize the military instrument of power against the Barbary States without fear of retribution from European powers.

To that end, and before learning about Tripoli's May 10, 1801, declaration of war against the U.S., Jefferson sought recommendations from his cabinet on a question that had been central in his mind since his time as U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary to France: "Shall the squadron now at Norfolk be ordered to cruise in the Mediterranean [and] what shall be the object of the cruise[?]"<sup>87</sup> Unanimous agreement on the "expediency of cruise" was followed by a near unanimous agreement for captains to "search for & destroy the enemy's vessels wherever they can find them" should a state of war exist.<sup>88</sup> Jefferson's May 21, 1801, letter to Yusuf Karamanli, the Pasha of Tripoli, was the pinnacle of Jefferson's 17-year quest to destroy despotic challenges to American overseas commerce through the use of naval power. With this context in mind, Jefferson's letter to Karamanli is a vindication of his thought and strategy:

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<sup>85</sup> Jefferson to Enoch Edwards, 30 March 1801, NARA FO JP.

<sup>86</sup> See Mikaberidze, *The Napoleonic Wars*, 126, concerning "formal end;" See Charles Esdaile, *Napoleon's Wars: An International History, 1803-1815* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 110, concerning "spirit of compromise."

<sup>87</sup> Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on a Cabinet Meeting, 15 May 1801," NARA FO JP.

<sup>88</sup> Thomas Jefferson, "Notes on a Cabinet Meeting, 15 May 1801," NARA FO JP.

We have found it expedient to detach a squadron of observation into the Mediterranean sea, to superintend the safety of our commerce there & to exercise our seamen in nautical duties. we recommend them to your hospitality and good offices should occasion require their resorting to your harbours. we hope that their appearance will give umbrage to no power for, while we mean to rest the safety of our commerce on the resources of our own strength & bravery in every sea, we have yet given them in strict command to conduct themselves towards all friendly powers with the most perfect respect & good order it being the first object of our sollicitude to cherish peace & friendship with all nations with whom it can be held on terms of equality & reciprocity.<sup>89</sup>

The confidence and self-assurance Jefferson demonstrated in his letter to Karamanli was also reflected in his May 20, 1801, instructions to Captain Dale. Jefferson directed Dale “to increase the commerce of our country within” the Mediterranean “as your judgement shall direct” by punishing and chastising the Barbary Powers should they “have declared War against the United States.”<sup>90</sup>

Simultaneously, however, President Jefferson continued to pursue his parsimonious fiscal and military policies designed to increase domestic revenue and avoid “confrontation with European superpowers.”<sup>91</sup> But even these policies leveraged the post-Quasi War global security environment. The flourishing of American commerce following the Peace of Amiens convinced Jefferson that a drawback in spending in favor of a coastal defense strategy and a forward-deployed Mediterranean squadron were two sides of the same coin.<sup>92</sup> In essence, the centrality of maritime commerce, supported by an apathetic global security environment, was the principal determinant of Jefferson’s decision to deploy U.S. naval forces against the Barbary States.

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<sup>89</sup> Jefferson to Yusuf Qaramanli, Pasha and Bey of Tripoli, 21 May 1801, NARA FO JP.

<sup>90</sup> Knox, ed., *Barbary Powers, Volume I*, 465–67.

<sup>91</sup> Randall, *Thomas Jefferson*, 563.

<sup>92</sup> See Randall, *Thomas Jefferson*, 564 who states that “American commerce was booming.” See also Robert J. Allison, *The Crescent Obscured: The United States and the Muslim World, 1776–1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 25–26, who writes: “Jefferson’s seemingly contradictory policies...were in fact directed to the same goal. He had taken part in a revolution against a large, abusive government. That revolution, as Jefferson saw it, was fought to free the people’s energies. By closing the Mediterranean to the people’s entrepreneurial spirit, the Barbary States imposed a barrier that was just as effective as the British Navigation Acts.”

## Jefferson Reconsidered

While Jefferson's resolute and bold decision to utilize the U.S. Navy in defense of American commerce during the First Barbary War is frequently applauded, his first-term naval administration policies concerning the mothball fleet, naval shore establishment consolidation at the Washington Navy Yard, and dry dock concept remain the subject of present-day criticism. Similarly, Jefferson's coastal defense gunboat strategy and his response to the *Chesapeake-Leopard* Affair and the subsequent Embargo Act of 1807 are actions historians continually reference to perpetuate an enigmatic image of Jefferson's overall naval policy. However, deeper analysis uncovers logical explanations refuting such criticism. These explanations are largely attributable to the centrality of maritime commerce, the global security environment, and Jefferson's predilection to rely upon reason and preparation.

Immediately hamstrung as the incoming President due to the Peace Establishment Act signed by his predecessor less than twenty-four hours before his inauguration, Jefferson was forced to contend with an extensive reduction in naval strength driven by Federalist fear and suspicion of Republican designs to abolish the navy.<sup>93</sup> In essence, it was the Adams administration, not Jefferson, who implemented legislation reducing naval strength for "economy reasons by authorizing the President to retain 13 frigates of those that been built or purchased...but to keep only 6 in active service."<sup>94</sup> Jefferson's first-term pledge to reduce the navy to the "legal establishment"<sup>95</sup> was in actuality perfectly aligned with Congressional legislation. As a strict constructionist, Jefferson was compelled to work within the bounds of the Peace Establishment Act, and his idea for a mothball fleet was designed to maximize limited

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<sup>93</sup> Toll, *Six Frigates*, 157.

<sup>94</sup> Glenn Tucker, *Dawn Like Thunder: The Barbary Wars and the Birth of the U.S. Navy* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1963), 131.

<sup>95</sup> Jefferson to Nathaniel Macon, 14 May 1801," NARA FO JP.

naval resources as efficiently as possible. The mothball fleet allowed the government to delay costly ship lifecycle requirements by employing frigates when urgently needed and laying “them by in slack seasons...[when] judged an unnecessary expense.”<sup>96</sup> Likewise, Jefferson’s use of the Washington Navy Yard for his dry dock concept, which he knew “significantly elongated the life of a wooden ship,” was also designed to optimize limited resources and maintain an operationally ready fleet of frigates as envisioned by the Peace Establishment Act.<sup>97</sup> In an April 17, 1801, letter to his acting Secretary of the Navy, Samuel Smith, Jefferson explained the rationale for “laying up the whole seven [frigates]” at the Washington Navy Yard since “they would be under the immediate eye of the department, and would require but one set of plunders to take care of them.”<sup>98</sup> With this in mind, Jefferson’s approach to naval administration was logically placed within the limitations of legislative requirements. Furthermore, Jefferson’s offensive use of the U.S. Navy to secure American commerce in the Mediterranean demonstrates a pro-navy mentality and is quite extraordinary since the First Barbary War was costly. For instance, U.S. naval commitments in the Mediterranean ultimately led to a ten-ship expansion of cruisers, brigs, schooners, sloops, and bomb vessels during 1803-1804 to help bring the war to a conclusion.<sup>99</sup>

Equally important is the recognition that U.S. military experience in the Mediterranean was partially responsible for the Jeffersonian gunboat program, notwithstanding Jefferson’s growing support of gunboats to “create a balanced defense for security”<sup>100</sup> that stemmed from his 1779 appreciation for the Pennsylvania state navy galleys. While Jefferson’s surviving letters

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<sup>96</sup> Tucker, *Dawn Like Thunder*, 131.

<sup>97</sup> Toll, *Six Frigates*, 161.

<sup>98</sup> Jefferson to Samuel Smith, 17 April 1801, NARA FO JP. See also Toll, *Six Frigates*, 159.

<sup>99</sup> Tucker, *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy*, 13.

<sup>100</sup> Jefferson to Richard Henry Lee, 17 July 1779, NARA FO JP; Smith, “A Means to An End,” 112.

contain some references to gunboats as effective means of naval policy, most of his correspondence on the subject was in response to political thinkers and fiscal conservatives. For instance, Thomas Paine, the author of *Common Sense*, wrote Jefferson on October 1, 1800, a mere six months before Jefferson became President, extolling the virtue of gunboats in coastal action. Paine followed his October 1800 letter with two additional letters in June and August 1801, underscoring the merits of gunboats in hypothetical engagement between the British and French. According to Paine, “a 1000 Gun-boats proper for a descent would not cost more than four or five ships of the line would cost, and they would hold England more in Check than 100 Ships of the line would do. Boats do not require to be manned by Sailors as Ships do, and need no other kind of Naval Stores than are produced in France.”<sup>101</sup>

Paine’s gunboat advocacy echoed similar viewpoints expressed by American naval officers and policymakers who were convinced that gunboats were a preferred means to contest Barbary commerce raiding in shallow Mediterranean waters following early naval action during the First Barbary War. For example, on February 2, 1802, Captain Dale wrote, “To make an Attack on Tripoli, it will be necessary to have one or two Born Vessels well fitted, with them, the Gun boats, and the Boats belonging to the Ships, I think the place may be attacked with little doubt of Success at least the Shipping [sic], in the Harbour [sic] may be Burnt, without much danger.”<sup>102</sup> Several days later, in a letter to the U.S. Minister in France, Robert Livingston, Captain Dale was blunter, stating, “It is absolutely necessary to have three or four Gun Boats.”<sup>103</sup> Heeding this advice, Congress appropriated \$50,000 for gunboat construction, the purpose of

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<sup>101</sup> Thomas Paine to Jefferson, August 1801, NARA FO JP.

<sup>102</sup> Dudley W. Knox, ed., *Naval Documents Related to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers, Volume II* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1935–1938), 46.

<sup>103</sup> Knox, ed., *Barbary Powers, Volume II*, 53.

which was to construct 15 gunboats “suitable for the coastal waters of North Africa.”<sup>104</sup> Simultaneously, events unfolding on the Mississippi River involving Spanish obstruction of New Orleans compelled consideration of a gunboat flotilla for “protection of the seamen and commerce of the United States.”<sup>105</sup> While first designed for action in the Mediterranean, gunboats were now considered a viable defensive option for inland waterways and the littoral.<sup>106</sup> The Louisiana Purchase, consummated on July 4, 1803, temporarily abated the need for gunboat construction until the “*Philadelphia* disaster” on October 31, 1803, caused Jefferson to “expedite the gunboat appropriation of February 1803 ‘in order that...our force might begin on models most proved by experience.’”<sup>107</sup> In this sense, a response to the global security environment, not a stubborn adherence to predetermined conservative fiscal policy, was responsible for the first-term Jeffersonian gunboat program that slowly grew into a viable naval strategy as a means to avoid entanglement in renewed Anglo-French conflict. Jefferson’s fourth annual message to Congress on November 8, 1804, demonstrated a commitment to avoid foreign entanglement threatening American commerce. He praised gunboats’ “utility towards supporting within our waters the authority of the laws, the promptness with which they will be manned by the seamen and militia of the place in the moment they are wanting, the facility of their assembling from different parts of the coast, to any point where they are required in greater force than ordinary.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Tucker, *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy*, 13.

<sup>105</sup> Smith, *Defense*, 25.

<sup>106</sup> Jefferson’s thinking about gunboats was undoubtedly influenced by successful employment in foreign navies such as the French, British, Swedish, and Russians. See Smith, *Defense*, 14–15. Jeffersonian gunboats were numbered rather than named, with Gunboat No. 1 more than likely designed after a gunboat in Naples; measurements were “58’6” on the keel, 18’0” beam, with a 4’6” depth.” See Smith, *Defense*, 14–15. Jefferson’s support of gunboats derived from a gunboat’s ability to function in “other roles to which larger ships were not well suited” and “to service in various capacities.” See Smith, *Defense*, 19.

<sup>107</sup> Smith, *Defense*, 29.

<sup>108</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Draft of the Annual Message, 25 October 1804,” NARA FO JP.

While the June 4, 1805, Treaty of Tripoli validated Jefferson's offensive use of the U.S. Navy to secure American commerce in the Mediterranean, echoes of the Quasi War reverberated midway through Jefferson's second term following the "flagrant insult" of HMS *Leopard* against the USS *Chesapeake* on June 22, 1807. In a quest to recover deserters, the *Leopard* unleashed seven unanswered broadsides into the *Chesapeake* off the Virginia capes, killing three and wounding seventeen seamen.<sup>109</sup> American anger stirred, and twenty-five-year-old memories of the British Intolerable Acts and the Revolutionary War resurfaced. War seemed likely. However, instead of recklessly leaping into conflict, Jefferson's diplomatic experience, operationalized through reason, tempered his initial inclination for a military response. Writing to John Wayles Eppes on July 12, 1807, Jefferson explained the need for patience: "Reason and the usage of civilized nations require that we should give [Britain] an opportunity of disavowal and reparation."<sup>110</sup> Of preparation, Jefferson wrote, "Our own interest, too, the very means of making war, requires that we should give time to our merchants to gather in their vessels and property and our seaman now afloat."<sup>111</sup> Sometimes construed as weakness, Jefferson's deliberate and measured response was buttressed by a firm disposition for military action should the need arise. "Reparation for the past and security for the future' is our motto," Jefferson wrote Samuel Du Pont de Nemours on July 14, 1807, "but whether the English will be yield—it freely, or will require resort to non-intercourse, or to war, is yet to be seen. We prepare for the last."<sup>112</sup> In preparing for the last, Jefferson was guided by a key foundation of his political thought, the centrality of maritime commerce, and an astute awareness of British maritime superiority that

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<sup>109</sup> Symonds, *The U.S. Navy: A Concise History*, 21. See also Jon Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* (New York: Random House, 2012), 424; Dumas Malone, *Jefferson The President: Second Term (1805–1809)* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 415–438.

<sup>110</sup> Quoted in Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson*, 427.

<sup>111</sup> Quoted in Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson*, 427.

<sup>112</sup> Jefferson to Pierre Samuel Du Pont de Nemours, 14 July 1807, NARA FO JP.

eventually gave rise to a political solution—the Embargo Act of 1807—which promised much but delivered little.<sup>113</sup>

Passed with bipartisan support, Jefferson signed the Embargo Act into law on December 22, 1807. The Embargo Act represented Jefferson’s idealist belief in the power of American commerce while reflecting a realistic appreciation for seemingly inadequate means to neutralize British maritime aggression. In Jefferson’s mind, neutrality was the natural course of action given the global security environment. In effect, withdrawing American commerce from overseas markets provided time, and Jefferson thought “time may produce peace in Europe. Peace in Europe removes all causes of differences till another European war, and by that time our debt may be paid, our revenues clear, and our strength increased.”<sup>114</sup> While the embargo somewhat negatively impacted British merchants and ultimately prevented war, the overall outcome was disastrous. Smuggling, starvation, increasing personal debt, and loss of confidence in the government, and Jefferson himself, led to nationwide uproar and turmoil.<sup>115</sup> Over a period of many months, the cost of the embargo became indefensible and political pressure resulted in the repeal of the Embargo Act through the Non-Intercourse Act in the waning days of the Jefferson administration. When viewed through the lens of commerce and geopolitics, Jefferson’s decision to avoid war with England in favor of an embargo resulted from statesmanship born from deep experience and understanding of maritime diplomacy. In short, Jefferson remained consistent in his judicious application of U.S. naval power supporting American commerce as dictated by the global security landscape.

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<sup>113</sup> Louis Martin Sears, *Jefferson and the Embargo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1927), 29.

<sup>114</sup> Jefferson to John Taylor, 6 January 1808, NARA FO JP.

<sup>115</sup> Sears, *Jefferson and the Embargo*, 73–142; Meacham, *Thomas Jefferson*, 433.

## Conclusion

The eventual success of the U.S. Navy during the first-term Jefferson administration in responding with strength to Barbary piracy is well-established and accepted. However, conflicting interpretations concerning the factors influencing Jefferson's decision to deploy the U.S. Navy offensively in the Mediterranean—and his first-term naval policy in general—create ambiguity and confusion. While domestic politics, finances, and political philosophy are commonly utilized to explain Jefferson's seemingly enigmatic utilization of the U.S. Navy, these explanations are insufficient. Rather, the preceding analysis of Jefferson's domestic and international political experience demonstrates how Jefferson's naval thought was borne from his reverence for the centrality of maritime commerce and appreciation of the global security environment. In concert, these two factors propagated a pro-navy mentality that Jefferson overtly and surreptitiously leveraged for personal political fortune and American independence. This Jeffersonian duality of commerce and geopolitics provides the means through which common criticisms—naval administration, coastal defense gunboat strategy, and the Embargo Act of 1807—can be reexamined to provide historical clarity and understanding.

The twenty-year period starting in 1774 and ending in 1794 was a formative time in Jefferson's political career. Revolutionary beliefs sanctifying the importance of maritime commerce as a means to safeguard liberty first emerged in Jefferson's *A Summary of View of Rights of British America* and formed the foundation of his pro-navy beliefs subsequently reinforced during his time as U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary to France and Secretary of State. Jefferson's experience in both positions convinced him about the importance of a strong U.S. Navy to protect America from European powers and North African piracy. Jefferson's 1779 appreciation of the Pennsylvania state navy galleys notwithstanding, he scarcely embodied the

philosophical opposition to navies historians have previously accredited to him. Rather, Jefferson realized that the basis for a national naval strategy depended upon an independent blue water capability to secure peace and security abroad.

From 1794 to 1801, Jefferson outwardly evolved his beliefs concerning naval policy to appease the Republican Party. In short, he projected antinavy beliefs for domestic political support. His conservative fiscal beliefs concerning national debt adopted a partisan hue concerning the navy and was influenced by correspondence with luminaries such as Thomas Paine, who connected standing navies and armies with tyranny and irresponsible spending. Published by Thomas Paine in 1791, *The Rights of Man* argued that reducing government spending on armies and navies leads to a surplus better spent on peaceful endeavors.<sup>116</sup> Such views help explain Jefferson's seemingly deleterious perspective of the navy as vice president. He was dissatisfied that the navy he helped build support for was being used to fight the French, the country he thought America should support during the French Revolutionary Wars.

Jefferson's ascension to the Presidency coincided with calm in the global security environment he exploited to safeguard American liberty and commerce in the Mediterranean. His strong advocacy for the establishment and use of a U.S. Navy, developed as U.S. Minister Plenipotentiary to France and Secretary of State, resurfaced shortly following his election abating antinavy sentiment exploited for political necessity as vice president and a presidential candidate. Although constrained by the Federalist-led Peace Establishment Act of 1801, Jefferson aggressively employed the U.S. Navy against the Barbary States, favoring a blue water approach to securing American commerce overseas and a coastal defense policy at home to maximize resources and reduce federal expenditures. The appearance of gunboats as a viable

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<sup>116</sup> Thomas Paine, *The Rights of Man* (London: J.S. Jordan, 1791). See also Jefferson to James Monroe, 10 July 1791, NARA FO JP, in which Jefferson stated that "I profess the same principles..."

means of naval warfare in shallow Mediterranean waters between 1800 and 1802 eventually merged with domestic naval policy concerning infringement of American commerce on the Mississippi River to induce a coastal defense naval strategy.<sup>117</sup> However, Jefferson's firm adherence to the maxims of free trade and commerce motivated him to remain committed to the use of naval force overseas against the Barbary States during the First Barbary War. In this sense, Jefferson is better characterized as steadfast than being described as an enigma. In other words, Jefferson's approach to naval policy and strategy was strikingly consistent upon considering how the centrality of maritime commerce and international affairs influenced Jefferson's pursuit of peace and prosperity, at home and abroad.

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<sup>117</sup> See Knox, ed., *Barbary Powers, Volume I*, 358: "Consul Cathcart is undoubt[ed]ly correct when he states that two of our Frigates and four of our Gun boats would bring the Bashaw of Tripolia to terms." See also Knox, ed., *Barbary Powers, Volume I*, 591: "those gun boats have taken a number of Vessels lately belonging to the United States..." See also Knox, ed., *Barbary Powers, Volume II*, 68: "It will be absolutely Necessary that you have three or four Good Gun Boats..."

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