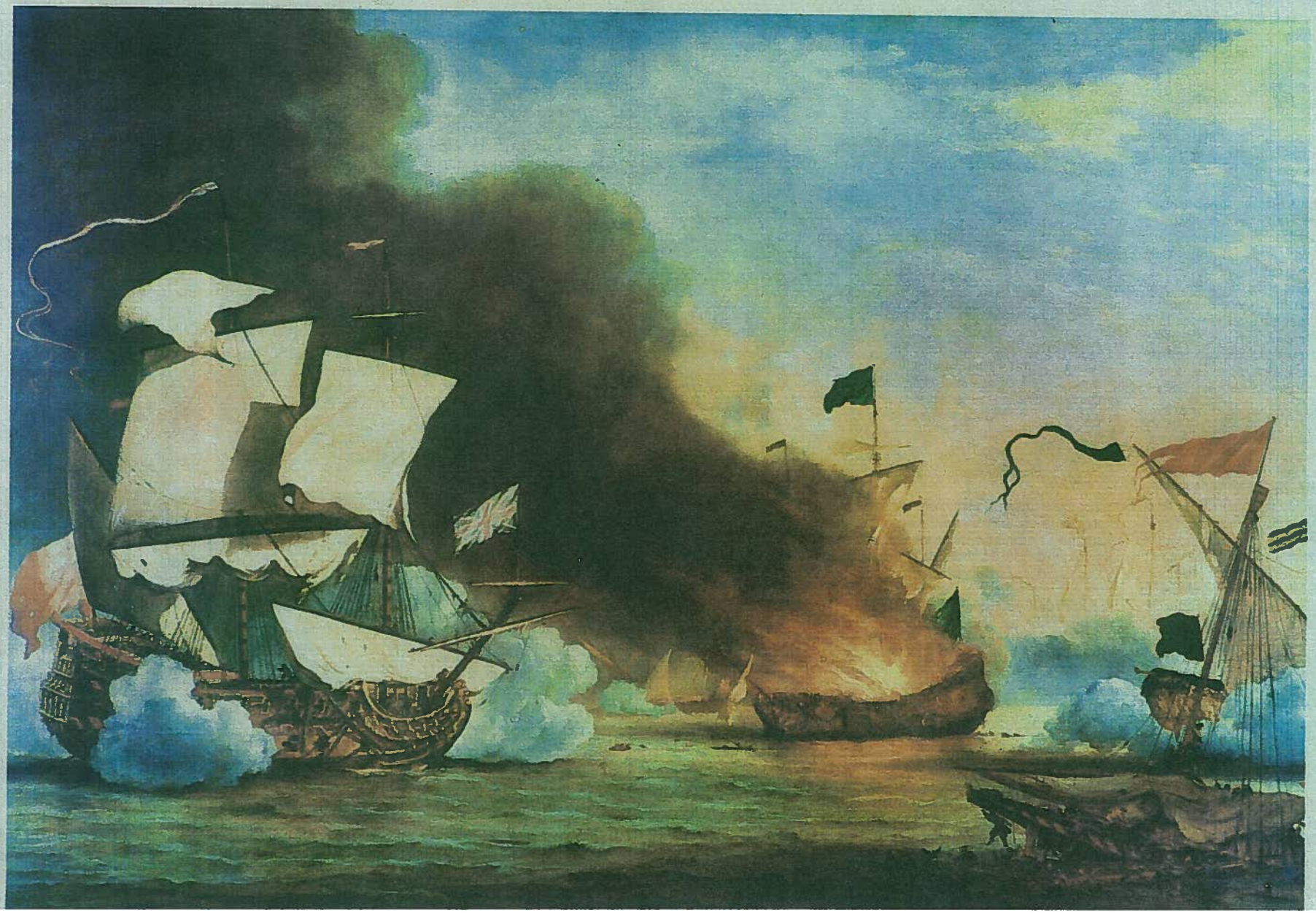
WEEKEND JOURNAL.



HOW TO DEAL WITH PIRATES

The rise of piracy is threatening international trade and raising complex questions. The only way to end the scourge is to respond aggressively, says **Michael B. Oren**.

THE ATTACK BEGAN when an unidentified vessel drew alongside a merchant ship in the open sea and heavily armed brigands stormed aboard. "They made signs for us all to go forward," one of the frightened crewmen remembered, "assuring us in several languages that if we did not obey their commands they would massacre us all." The sailors were then stripped of all valuables and most of their clothing and locked in the hull of their own captured ship. They would be held in unspeakable conditions, subsisting on eight ounces of bread a day and threatened with beating and even beheading should they resist. "Death would be a great relief and more welcome than the continuance of our present situation," one of the prisoners lamented.

The attack on the merchant ship, an American brig, occurred over 200 years ago in the Mediterranean during the scourge of the Barbary pirates. Sponsored by Morocco and the city-states of Tunis, Algiers and Tripoli, the pirates preyed on civilian vessels, plundering their cargoes and kidnapping their crews. "It was written in the Koran...that it was their [the pirates'] right and duty to make war upon whoever they could find and to make Slaves of all they could take as prisoners," the emissary of Tripoli's pasha told a startled John Adams and Thomas Jefferson in London in 1785. The emissary demanded $1 million from the United States—one-tenth of the national budget—to suspend the assaults or face losing the valuable Mediterranean trade, representing one-fifth of all American exports.

The choice was excruciating. No longer protected by the British navy and lacking any gunboats of its own, the U.S. had no ready military option. Nor did it have international support. Jefferson's attempt to create an international coalition together with European states was summarily rejected. Defenseless and internationally isolated, most Americans were opposed to devoting their scarce resources to building a navy and instead favored following the age-old European custom of bribing the pirates—the euphemism was "tribute"—in exchange for safe passage. "Would to Heaven we had a navy to reform these enemies to mankind or crush them into non-existence," an exasperated George Washington confided to his old comrade-in-arms, the Marquis de Lafayette.

Washington's frustration could well be echoed today in the face of escalating assaults by pirates from Somalia. Over 90 such attacks have occurred this year alone—a threefold increase since 2007—resulting in the capture of 14 ships and 250 of their crew members. Among their prizes, the pirates have seized a Ukrainian freighter crammed with Soviet-made battle tanks and, most recently, the tanker Sirius Star with $100 million worth of Saudi crude in its holds. These shipments are now being held off the Somali coast where the pirates are bargaining for their return.

Superficially, at least, there are

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COVER STORY

ESSAY

How to Deal With Pirates

Continued from the prior page
many differences between the Somali pirates and their Barbary predecessors. The Somali bandits have no declared state sponsors and no avowed religious pretext. Their targets are no longer principally American ships but flags of all nations, including those of Arab states. And they are more interested in ransoming cargoes of arms and oil than hapless sailors. Yet, no less than in the 18th century, 21st-century piracy threatens international trade and confronts the U.S. with complex questions.

Should the U.S. Navy, for example, actively combat the pirates, emulating the Indian warship that destroyed a Somali speedboat earlier this week? Can the U.S., which is already overstretched militarily in two conflicts, afford to assume responsibility for another open-ended operation in the same area? Or should America follow the example now being set by Saudi Arabia and various Asian states which, according to United Nations statistics, have paid $25 million to $30 million in ransoms to the pirates this year alone?

Rough Seas: Armed pirates guard the beach in Hobyo, Somalia, above. Pirates dominate the town, and most of the local residents have fled. Right, the hijacked Saudi oil tanker Sirius Star sits off the coast of Somalia on Nov. 19. **ON THE COVER:** 'Barbary Pirates,' a 1681 painting by William van de Velde the Younger.

Addressing the threat of Somali pirates must be made **a national priority** while there is still time. Much like terrorism, piracy, unless uprooted, will mushroom.

The answers to these questions can be gleaned from America's experience with Barbary. Lacking a navy and unwilling to bear the financial burden of building one, early American leaders opted to pay tribute to the pirates. By the 1790s, the U.S. was depositing an astonishing 20% of its federal income into North African coffers—this in addition to costly naval stores and even cannons and gunpowder. In return for this tribute, America only received more piracy. Foreign corporations refused to ship their goods in American hulls and U.S. diplomats were forced to sail overseas on European-flagged ships for fear of seizure. Dozens of American sailors languished in captivity.

Humiliated by these depredations, the American public grew critical of its feckless government and began to demand action. "Steer the hostile prow to Barb'ry's shores," wrote an anonymous poet, a veteran of the Battle of Bunker Hill, "release thy sons, and humble Africa's power." In response, in 1794, Congress passed a bill authorizing $688,888.82 for the construction of six frigates "adequate for the protection of the commerce of the U.S. against Algerian corsairs." By 1801, America possessed a navy capable of striking back at the pirates and a president willing to do so. In reply to Tripoli's declaration of war against the U.S., Thomas Jefferson ordered those frigates into battle.

Many setbacks would be suffered by U.S. Naval forces in what was later called the Barbary Wars, not the least of which was the capture of the USS Philadelphia and its 307-man crew by Tripoli. Nevertheless, an intrepid trek by U.S. Marines and a mercenary force 500 miles across the Libyan desert—*to the shores of Tripoli*—in 1805 compelled the pirates to yield. Ten years later, President James Madison dispatched a fleet under Commodore Stephen Decatur to vanquish the remaining Barbary States. Shamed by these initiatives, the Europeans followed suit and sent their own warships to subdue the pirates, but the U.S. remained vigilant. A U.S. Mediterranean squadron—the forebear of today's Sixth Fleet—was kept on permanent patrol to ensure that Middle Eastern pirates never again threatened American commerce.

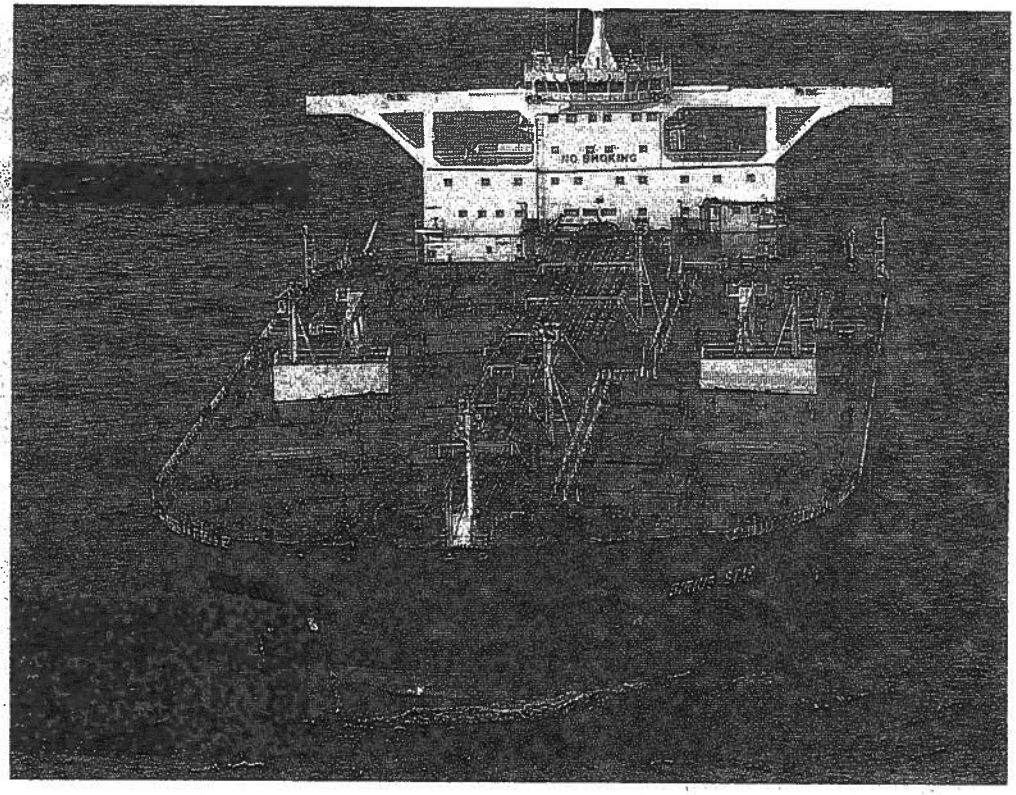
Of course, the world is a vastly more complicated place than it was two centuries ago and America's role in it, once peripheral, is now preeminent. Still, in the post-9/11 period, America would be ill-advised to act unilaterally against the pirates. The good news is: It does not have to. In contrast to the refusal to unite with America during the Barbary Wars, or more recently the Iraq War, the European states today share America's interest in restoring peace to the seas. Moreover, they have expressed a willingness to cooperate with American military measures against the Somali bandits. Unlike Washington and Jefferson, George W. Bush and Barack Obama need not stand alone.

Such a campaign will not be risk-free. The danger exists that America and its allies will become bogged down indefinitely in seeking to locate and destroy an elusive foe. The operations may also prove costly at a time when America can least afford them. Finally, there is the constant headache of maintaining an international coalition which may contain members who, like many early Americans, prefer to bribe the pirates rather than fight them.

In spite of the potential pitfalls, an America-led campaign against the pirates is warranted. Though the Somali pirates do not yet endanger American trade, they will be emboldened by a lack of forceful response. Any attempt to bargain with them and to pay the modern equivalent of tribute will beget more piracy. Now, as then, the only effective response to piracy is a coercive one. "We shall offer them liberal and enlightened terms," declared Commodore Decatur, "dictated at the mouths of our cannons." Or, as William Eaton, commander of the Marines' march to Tripoli, more poignantly put it: "There is but one language that can be held to these people, and this is terror."

The U.S. is no longer the fragile and isolated country it was in the 1780s. It today possesses unrivaled naval power that it projects globally and enjoys far-reaching international support for unleashing that power against pirates. And while it is true that U.S. forces are deeply committed elsewhere in the region, addressing the threat of Somali pirates must be made a national priority while there is still time. Much like terrorism, piracy, unless uprooted, will mushroom.

George Washington wished that America had a navy capable of crushing the "enemies to mankind"—that is, not only the enemies of the U.S. His vision is now a reality. We have only to recognize it.



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See an interactive map of some recent Somali pirate attacks, at **WSJ.com/Lifestyle**.

Pirate Hall of Fame

In the 1700s, high-seas pillaging was rampant. Here are some of the most notorious practitioners of the craft in history.

—Juliet Chung

▲ Henry Avery

This former Royal Navyman, born around 1653, had a short but successful career as a pirate. He seized command of a ship in 1694, renamed her Fancy and plundered ships in Cape Verde and on the west coast of Africa. The biggest prize—and the coup that would make his name a legend—came in the fall of 1695, when Mr. Avery and his crew encountered the Ganj-i-Sawai, the largest ship of the Mogul Emperor in India. An early shot brought down the main mast of the Ganj-i-Sawai. Meanwhile, one of the ship's cannons exploded, causing mayhem among the crew of the Ganj-i-Sawai, according to David Cordingly's account of the clash in "Under the Black Flag." Mr. Avery retired after the ship's capture and division of its loot.

Blackbeard ▸

The ferocious fighter and womanizer raided ships in the Caribbean and along the Eastern Seaboard. Born Edward Teach or Thatch, Blackbeard was known for his luxuriant beard, which he decorated with ribbons and even slow-burning fuses on occasion, says Pieter van der Merwe, general editor of the National Maritime Museum in London. He eventually commandeered his own ship, Queen Anne's Revenge, and is said to have bested a British man o' war around 1717 that was sent to destroy him before plundering dozens of other ships over the next six months. Blackbeard came to an inglorious end in 1718 after the governor of Virginia put a price of 100 pounds on his head; his vanquisher hung Blackbeard's decapitated head from his ship.

Black Bart

Bartholomew Roberts, born around 1682, was one of the most successful pirate captains of the early 18th century. His career take was estimated at 400 boats—more than Blackbeard's tally—and was marked by swift, savage attacks. One of his best-known captures was of a Portuguese merchant ship traveling in a convoy along the South American coast. Black Bart coerced the captain of another boat in the convoy to identify the richest ship, then had the captain hail the target. Black Bart and his crew made off with booty including gold, jewelry meant for the king of Portugal, sugar and tobacco.

Anne Bonny ▾

Born in 1698, Ms. Bonny was the illegitimate daughter of a lawyer, and abandoned her husband to become the mistress of the pirate Calico Jack. She is often mentioned in the same breath as Mary Read, another female who became part of Calico Jack's crew when he captured the ship she was traveling on. Both women disguised their gender by dressing in men's clothes. Calico Jack and crew were eventually captured and hanged, but the women escaped death by revealing that they each were pregnant. Ms. Bonny's later life is said to have been one of reinvention. Some accounts suggest she was released from prison, married a South Carolina man to whom she bore eight children "and became a respectable woman" who died in her 80s, says Mr. van der Mewe.

Zheng Yi Sao

When her husband died around 1807, Zheng Yi Sao (or Cheng I Sao) took over a large, well-organized confederation of pirates in the South China Sea. At its height, the confederation probably numbered between 50,000 and 70,000 men and controlled 800 large vessels, says Dian Murray, a Chinese history professor at the University of Notre Dame. The confederation made much of its money selling protection to merchants, fishermen and coastal villages, but also profited from plundering ships and ransoming passengers. By 1810, when the group disbanded to take an offer of amnesty from the government, "they had picked the coast clean and trade had been substantially reduced," Ms. Murray says. "She was able to hold the thing together and ultimately negotiate a successful settlement."

▲ Sister Ping

This modern-day pirate from the Fujian province of China arranged for ship hijackings in the South China Sea from the 1970s though the 1990s. Cheng Chui Ping, known as Sister Ping, modified the vessels into unidentifiable phantom ships, and used them to smuggle thousands of Chinese immigrants to the U.S. and Europe, says John S. Burnett, author of "Dangerous Waters: Modern Piracy and Terror on the High Seas." "They'd be paying up to $35,000 per passage to be locked up in the bottom of a hold of a small leaky boat," he says. Not all survived. In June 2000, 58 of 60 passengers who had come from Fujian by boat suffocated in a truckload of tomatoes at Dover, England. Sister Ping was recently convicted in the U.S. of heading a smuggling operation, and sentenced to 35 years in prison.

epa/Corbis (top); US Navy/Getty Images (middle); Bettmann/Corbis (Avery); Daily News (Ping); Corbis (Bonny); Hulton Archive/Getty Images (Blackbeard)