

The War of 1812

One American's Story

From 1801 to 1805, the United States was at war with Tripoli, a state on the Barbary coast of North Africa. The war began because of attacks on American merchant ships by Barbary pirates. The United States had been paying protection money, or **tribute**, but the pasha (ruler) of Tripoli wanted more money.

In February 1804, President Thomas Jefferson sent U.S. Navy Lieutenant Stephen Decatur to destroy the U.S. ship *Philadelphia*, which was in the hands of Barbary pirates. Decatur set fire to the *Philadelphia* and then escaped under enemy fire. Later, he issued this rallying cry.

PRIMARY SOURCE

“Our country! In her [relationships] with foreign nations may she always be in the right; but our country, right or wrong.”

—Stephen Decatur, 1816

The conflict with Tripoli showed how hard it was for the United States to stay out of foreign affairs while its citizens were involved in overseas trade.

The Path to War

KEY QUESTION What conflicts with other nations did the United States have in the early 1800s?

Jefferson wanted the United States to seek the friendship of all nations but have “entangling alliances with none.” However, his desire to keep the United States out of conflict with other nations was doomed from the start. American merchants were engaged in trade all over the world. Besides, the United States had little control over the actions of foreign powers.

Problems with France and England War broke out between France and Great Britain in 1803. The United States tried to stay out of the war. But many American trading ships made stops in Europe. The British captured any ship bound for France, and the French stopped all ships bound for Britain.



Stephen Decatur was a hero of the war between the United States and the North African state of Tripoli.