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## Yemen's Houthis Become Today's Red Sea Version of the 'Barbary Pirates'



Houthis, Youtube screengrab from VOA.

When my husband and I were producing the pro-West Beirut (Lebanon) *Daily Star*, one of Yemen's tyrannical kings was ruling from an elaborate barber's chair. Its few exports were chiefly coffee, cotton, and hides, but also postage stamps for international collectors. One of its most infamous imports we interviewed was California's outspoken and dramatic ex-patriot Bruce Conde Chalmers. He was a former U.S army intelligence specialist, an avid stamp collector and designer, who claimed royal Bourbon bloodlines, and then served as an advisor and soldier for the king.

He had just made Mideast headlines by tearing up his US passport on a charge of American “imperial exploitation” in the region. Yemen had “exported” him as a spy. A dozen other countries blocked him at airports except for Lebanon whose soft-hearted government let him live at the Beirut airport. Conde was stateless until the king relented, letting him return to his beloved Asir mountains rugged coastal chain (elevation: 2,000-12,000 ft.) to live with the ferocious, puristic Shiite sect.

“Conde” had converted to Islam and was the first to tell us how that sect—today’s Houthis—fought royal corruption and repression on one hand and, on the other, the Saudis’ perpetual tries at border acquisitions. Indeed, the Houthis had been rebelling against royal impurities and the Saudis since the ninth century up to recently. The mountains were ideal for guerrilla training and hiding for their many military successes, enhanced in 1990 after a series of coups united north and south Yemen. They’re now said to control 80 percent of this feisty country.

We lost track of Conde who had moved to Spain for research and writing, then to Tangier, Morocco where he died in August 1992. He and hundreds of “Old Mideast hands” were right, of course, about the U.S imperialist alliances to control Mideast raw resources and covertly aid

’s eventual plan to eradicate Palestinians and/or drive them into the Sinai desert. Above all, he warned about ever tangling with Yemenis on the ground. We now know from the U.S.-aided Saudis that they are indestructible despite air attacks and coastal blockades on the Red Sea.

The U.S. allied with the Saudis because of its critical needs for oil and support for seizing Iraq’s vast reserves when it launched both Gulf and 9/11 wars. In quiet retaliation, Russia and Iran have since supplied the Houthis with drones, ballistic missiles, and helicopters to serve as “mosquito-coast” proxies against the U.S. and Israel. They knew those “gifts” to Yemen would also unnerve the Saudis, their acquisitive, bitter northern neighbor.

### **Attacks Resemble Somalis**

The Houthis’ recent attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea is *somewhat* similar to the Somali pirates operating off Africa’s eastern waterways from 2005 to 2012 (212 boardings in 2011 alone). They suddenly stopped only to reappear last November and be caught after fleeing a targeted freighter. Somalis had received no such “gifts,” relying on personal weaponry (pistols, Kalashnikov rifles, light machine guns) and specialized *only* in ransom of ships and crews, not hijacking cargos or safe-passage bribes.

The World Bank reported their take from 2005-12 was \$400 million which cost the “world economy” an annual \$18 billion.

By contrast, the Houthi mission has been political: to *sink* merchant ships traversing up the Red Sea and the Suez Canal carrying military matériel chiefly to Israel for its Gaza genocide of Palestinians. This maritime “inconvenience” is forcing shippers to spend two extra weeks, plus increasing significant fuel costs and insurance rates by having to sail *around* Africa’s Cape of Good Hope and through Gibraltar to reach Mediterranean markets.

Both missions, however, are a derring-do resurrection of the 1785-1815 Barbary Pirate Wars along North Africa’s coast.

Now, piracy dares back to Phoenician trading days as a lucrative, if dangerous, profession, particularly after Columbus brought booty back to Spain from the New World. Thieves used small boats and their murderous crews to lay waiting just off southern Europe for subsequent ships with cargoes of stolen gold and other precious goods stripped from New World lands and people. These coastal highwaymen would come alongside a ship, board it, and greet the startled crew with: “daggers in each hand and a third in his mouth, which usually struck such terror in the foe that they cried out for quarter at once,” when Thomas Jefferson wrote about the Barbary brigands in 1786 as the ambassador to France.

Historically, the Barbary pirates were largely fierce Berber tribesmen joined by Turks drawn to adventure and profits, and Moslems driven from Spain. They were strung along the coasts of Spain and North Africa (today’s Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya). In collusion with Barbary State leaders, they controlled commercial traffic bound for Mediterranean ports by demanding annual “tribute” and “gifts” from shippers’ safe passage through Gibraltar to eastern port cities. Those refusing such extortion risked losing their ships, having sailors either ransomed (@ \$1,200-2,920) or sold as slaves, often for pirate galleys.

Foreign businessmen shrugged off such extortion shrugged and factored it in as a business expense, along with paying for protection services by French, British or Portuguese navies. Not colonial America merchants, however, particularly after the Revolution when Britain barred such help. The French were caught up in their own revolution. Only the Portuguese navy remained, thanks to a friendly queen.

### **Jefferson Besieged by American Merchants**

In Paris, Jefferson seemed to have taken the brunt of incensed American merchants’ complaints, increasing by the month. They apparently were not about to pay ship owners

for cannons and rifles to protect the cargoes. Unless the pirates were wiped out, they argued, American commerce would be literally “dead in the water.”

He then tried in vain to enlist Italy, Portugal and “weaker naval powers” into a U.S. coalition to militarily wipe out the pirates and Barbary States. He fumed to friend James Monroe in Congress that American naval action sweeping the North African coast would put an end to the Barbary gangsters:

“ this will require a protecting force on the sea. Otherwise the smallest powers in Europe, every one which possesses a single ship of the line may dictate to us, and enforce their demands by captures on our commerce. Some naval force then is necessary if we mean to be commercial. Can we have a better occasion of beginning one?”

He also wrote John Adams, then ambassador to Britain, that he had four basic reasons for strongly suggesting to president Washington and Congress to resurrecting the Revolution’s navy to defend American business. They are still used today to justify U.S. wars and “temporary” occupations: justice, honor, global respect, and presidential power to coerce “delinquent members” of Congress into declaring wars.

However, the practical Adams initially opposed that action. “A war would cost ten times more than paying tribute,” he said . He also doubted whether taxpayers or Congress would approve starting a new navy just to protect businessmen’s profits in far-off lands.

### **Congress Takes Two Years to Resurrect the U.S. Navy**

Adams’ Congressional colleagues agreed with him so tenaciously that it took two years of heated debates for spending over \$45 million (in 2023 values) to build six 38-gun frigates and 10 galleys to resurrect the U.S. Navy largely on behalf of America’s businesses, as well as their financial backers, the shipbuilders and arms factories—and war lovers.

Undoubtedly, floor arguments *initially* opposed defending business interests: The new nation had just ended a nearly eight-year war with Britain at immense cost in blood and indebtedness and decommissioned its wartime navy. It had few tax dollars in the treasury so far to pay for a new navy—or army. And unpaid financiers and banks would balk at new loans for the government. True, French, British, and Portuguese kings and parliaments could order *their* navies to fight piracy, but in the U.S. only Congress had that power. Too, if businesses paid “shotguns” to protect goods in overland stagecoaches and wagons, let *them* pay their shippers for small arms, cannons, and gunners to drive off foreign hijackers.

The rebuttals involved the traditional pro-business views resting on growing the young nation's economy: jobs, raw-material purchases by factories and stores, expansion of the country, national pride and respect abroad, and import-export trade of finished goods and agricultural products and livestock

In Jefferson's day as well as Biden's, enormous lobbying efforts and campaign donations by businesses and accompanying profiteers—banks and financiers, ship owners and builders, war lovers— obviously changed Congressional thinking. It was backed up by their public rallying cry of "Millions for Defense, Not one cent for Tribute". And the Constitution's approval in 1789 gave Congress power to punish pirates, declare war, to raise and support Armies, to provide and maintain a Navy, and regulate both.

So in the end, "business interests" won Congress' vote for the Naval Act of 1794 (House: 30-0). President Washington signed it on March 27, authorizing a resurrected U.S. Navy and construction of those frigates and galleys.

By using 1805 as a reference year, total cost to taxpayers for waging the Barbary Wars from 1785-1815 has been estimated at \$1 million (\$27 billion in 2024). It covered passage protection, naval operations, and shipping disruptions.

### **Businesses Never Reimbursed Government and Taxpayers**

Outside of lobbying and donation expenses, affected businesses apparently never reimbursed the government and taxpayers, something that Adams as president never demanded. He set the precedent for all future presidents.

The same result can be expected if Biden's dealings with the Houthis' shore-side batteries continue to follow Jefferson's footsteps in dealing with the Barbary pirates: First, move in the "big sticks" (two carrier strike forces) with an international coalition to increase strength and share costs under the business mantra of "freedom of navigation in the Red Sea region.". Then, let the Marines lead the ground counterattacks in coastal Yemen's mountains (presumably singing "From the Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Tripoli"). He's already ordered Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin on December 18 to announce the formation of another coalition-of-the-willing (interestingly called the Operation Prosperity Guardian), claiming 10 nations have already joined to guarantee "security challenges in the southern Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden bolstering...prosperity."

But, like Jefferson, that effort has begun to unravel immediately. Spain was miffed at not being consulted before inclusion and, instead, favored the European Union (EU) to run any anti-Houthi operation. French officials said its ships would remain under its

command. Italy wants to act independently, and long-time ally Australia passed on membership.

Four days later, 31 American anti-war movements contacted Biden to “rule out” any military escalation in Yemen. Many Congressional Republicans want an end to military aid to the Russo-Ukrainian war, playing to Americans tired of blood-and-treasure wars lost in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. It’s shown today in the regular massive demonstrations against aiding Israel’s genocide in Gaza. The group’s message to Biden pointed out:

“While these [Houthi] attacks are concerning, expanding the war into Yemen will not resolve them and instead may dramatically worsen the threats to commercial shipping both in the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and other regional waterways....A full-blown open-ended regional war would be horrific and undoubtedly entail significant casualties to U.S. forces and civilian populations across the region...”

Knowing the demonstrations will only increase on this possible new invasion and bloodbath, Biden’s advisors might well follow John Adams’ view of *never* using a blunderbuss on a mosquito. Instead, let the destroyer gunners do target practice on Houthi attacks and munitions depots until, like the Somalians, they stop. Then, bill those businesses for services rendered.

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