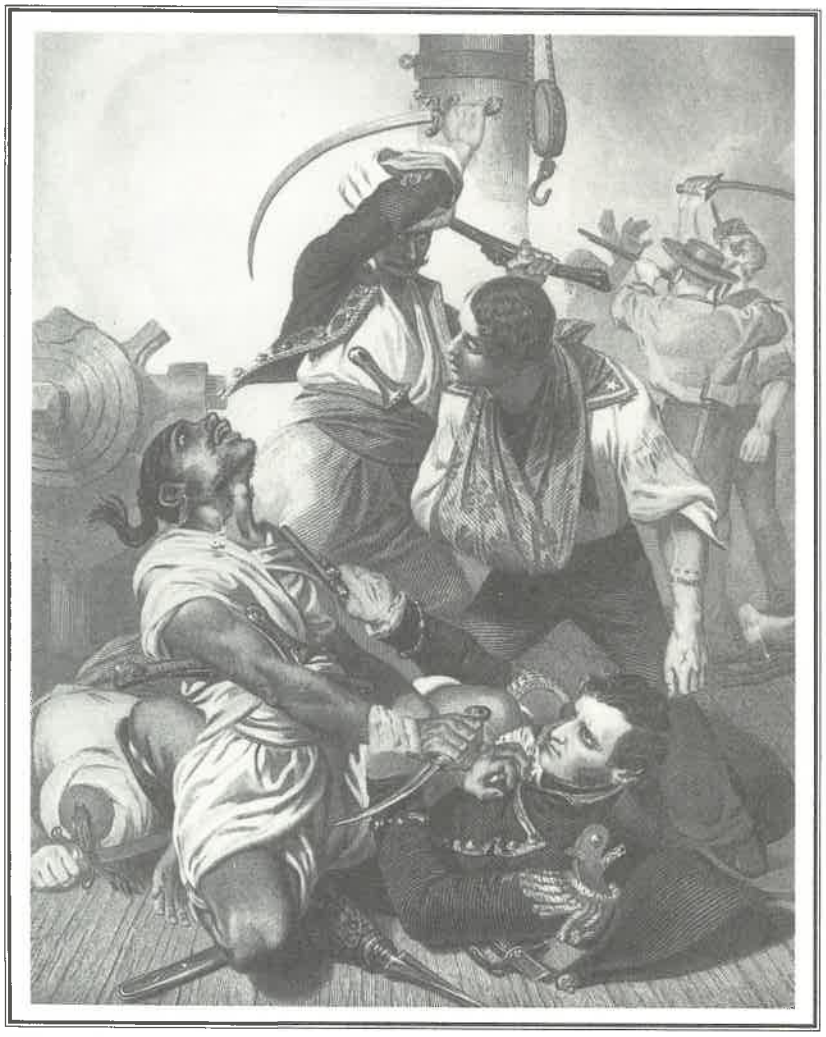

This popular engraving, first issued just before the Civil War, shows two American heroes and two Muslim enemies. Stephen Decatur learned, after the fierce naval battle of August 3, 1804, that his brother James had been killed by a Turkish officer who had surrendered. Decatur tracked down his brother's killer, shown here with Decatur's pistol aimed at his throat. Decatur himself was almost killed by the Tripolitan sailor shown raising his sword. But American sailor Daniel Fraser, also known as Reuben James, put himself between the Turkish sword and his captain. This engraving calls the Tripolitan enemy an "Algerine," thus confusing America's Muslim enemies of 1804 with those of 1793.

THE CRESCENT OBSCURED

The United States and the Muslim World 1776–1815

ROBERT J. ALLISON

New York Oxford
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
1995

The dilemma of slavery lay just beneath the surface of the political and constitutional debates of the 1770s and 1780s. The wisest of the founders, like James Madison, knew that this problem ultimately would undo all of the compromises they had so carefully worked out. But even the wisest of them could find no way to resolve this problem. As Connecticut's Mr. Mawyay noted, American legislators, even in New England, preferred the property rights of slave owners to the human rights of slaves. In a nation founded to secure property rights, this was an ominous sign. In 1790 the tension between personal and property rights flared up in the U.S. Congress. A group of Pennsylvania Quakers petitioned Congress to abolish the slave trade. The Constitution had given Congress the power to do this, but not before 1808. The Quakers could see no virtue in waiting eighteen years to eliminate a sin. But representatives from South Carolina and Georgia, whose white constituents still needed to import slaves to cultivate their rice crops, protested. They still needed their slaves, they said; the Constitution would allow them to import slaves until 1808. Had the Constitution not given them this, they might not have accepted it.

The Quakers, like the author of *Humanity in Algiers*, might be dismissed as religious zealots determined to make others adhere to their own moral standard. Most members of Congress were ready to ignore the Quakers and concentrate on establishment of a national bank, assumption of state debts, internal taxes, and the site of a national capital, that were quickly dividing the new government into political parties. The simple argument that Congress could not interfere in states' institutions, and could not abolish the slave trade until 1808, was enough to dismiss the Quakers. But two days after Congress received the Quaker petition, it received another petition

from a secular group, the Pennsylvania Society for the Abolition of Slavery. Instead of religious arguments, the Pennsylvania Society used political and ideological arguments that came from the heart of America's Revolutionary struggle. "From a persuasion that equal liberty was originally the portion, and is still the birthright of all men," the Pennsylvania Society was moved by the "strong ties of humanity" to "use all justifiable endeavors to loosen the bands of slavery." The society called on Congress to do the same, urging it to "step to the very verge" of its power to discourage "every species of traffic in the persons of our fellow-men."[17] This petition was signed by the Pennsylvania Society's president, Benjamin Franklin.

Though the Quakers were easily dismissed, Franklin was not. The protectors of slavery had to advance different arguments to use against a political antislavery movement which based its case on ideological precepts they shared. A congressman from South Carolina merely said that Franklin "ought to have known the Constitution better," and repeated that Congress had no power to interfere in a local institution or with the rights to property. But others knew that merely basing their argument on property rights or on state power would not be enough, that moral zeal combined with the ideals of the Revolution would destroy any legalistic property rights or states' rights argument. Georgia congressman James Jackson knew this, and knew that defenders of slavery must not grant their attackers' starting premise: that the institution was evil. If they did so, the battle was over. If they wanted slavery to survive attacks from Franklin and the Quakers, they must show that slavery was a good thing.

Jackson did this, blasting both Franklin and the Quakers as overzealous meddlers trying to destroy a valuable social institution. Those who attacked slavery, Jackson said, were ignorant. Religion, economics, politics, and history all justified slavery; Franklin and the Quakers were ignorant of all these things. Enslaved Africans, Jackson said, were taught the Christian virtues, and Georgians had done these slaves a great favor by lifting them out of barbarism. The slaves, then, had benefitted from the benevolent care of good Christian masters like Jackson. If the slaves were set free, Jackson asked, what

would they do? Their freedom would ruin Georgia's economy. The slaves would not work unless they were forced to do so. If the freed blacks moved to the frontier, the Indians would kill them. So the only benevolent option was to keep these people as slaves, teach them Christianity, and allow them to cultivate Georgia's rice.

Jackson was a young and ambitious politician; Franklin an old man. Franklin may well have expected the petition on slavery to be his last public act: He was eighty-four years old and just a few weeks from the grave. But when he read Congressman Jackson's speech on slavery in the *Federal Gazette* in March 1790, Franklin launched one more missile. The stakes were too high to let Jackson go unchallenged, allowing the American republic, which Franklin had helped to create, go off into a morally corrupt future. Franklin also knew that moral indignation and direct attack were easy to ignore. Over his seventy years in public life, he had learned to use much more devastating weapons. He knew how to write satire and knew that no rhetorical device can be more effective than pretending to agree with an opponent, and pushing an argument based on a ridiculous premise to its inevitably absurd conclusion.

So, writing as "Historicus," Franklin praised Jackson's speech and said it reminded him of a similar speech he had read years earlier in *Martin's Account of his Consulship*, a book Franklin made up. The speech which Jackson's so closely echoed had been delivered in 1687 by Sidi Mehemet Ibrahim, the dey of Algiers.[18] A group of religious zealots, the Erika, or "Purists," had petitioned Sidi Mehemet to abolish Christian slavery and piracy. Slavery and piracy, the Erika said, were unjust and against the teachings of the Quran. Having set out the occasion, Franklin took Jackson's speech, defending African slavery in America, and made it a defense of Christian slavery in North Africa.

Slavery and piracy might be unjust, Sidi Mehemet agreed, but asked, "If we forbear to make slaves" of Christians, "who in this hot climate are to cultivate our lands?" Jackson had made this same point. Sidi Mehemet asked, if Algiers did not have Christian slaves, "Must we not then be our own slaves?" and what would happen to

the slaves themselves if their Muslim masters set them free? "Must we maintain them as beggars in our streets, or suffer our properties to be the prey of their pillage?" Freed Christians could never be the equals of Muslims; they would not "embrace our holy religion; they will not adopt our manners; our people will not pollute themselves by intermarrying with them." Accustomed to slavery, they would not work unless they were forced to do so, and if they went out to the frontiers, they were too ignorant to establish a "good government" and would be massacred by wild Arabs. This ignorant weakness was not their fault: In their own countries these Christians—Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Italian—were all treated as slaves. Algerians had done them a favor by bringing them to work "where the sun of Islamism gives forth its light." To send them back to Europe would be to send them "out of light into darkness." Finally, if Algiers gave up slavery, piracy, and plunder, it would destroy its own economy merely to gratify "the whims of a whimsical sect."

The Algerians had found it impossible to say that plunder and slavery were wrong. After hearing Sidi Mehemet the Algerians decided that the moral argument was "at best *problematical*." Ending slavery would produce more problems than it would solve, and though some might think slavery a moral wrong, it was best for the majority's interest that it be left alone. The U.S Congress came to the same conclusion: Plunder and slavery, whether right or wrong, were in the states' interest.

Franklin fabricated the Erika, Sidi Mehemet, and *Martin's Account of his Consulship*. Unfortunately, he had not made up James Jackson. The similarities Franklin said he found between Jackson's speech and Sidi Mehemet's showed that "men's interests and intellects operate and are operated on with surprising similarity in all countries and climates, whenever they are under similar circumstances." Though Americans boasted of their own fidelity to the rights of man, they proved themselves no different from Turks or Algerians when those rights came into conflict with self-interest. Jefferson's blunt warning on slavery—that it would destroy the American republic by twisting American personalities—and the call delivered by *Humanity in Algiers*

for Americans to awaken to their moral responsibilities were ignored. Americans pursued their immediate interests, leaving others to reckon with the consequences of their mistakes. Franklin, in the last essay published in his lifetime, came to the somber conclusion that Americans were no more likely than Algerians to be awakened to their moral responsibilities.