



Dealings with Mellimelli, Colorful Envoy from Tunis

A salute from the guns of the frigate *USS Congress* announced the arrival of the ambassador from Tunis. Sidi Soliman Mellimelli



A 19th-century engraving of Barbary states officials in ceremonial garb.

and his attendants were greeted at the Washington Navy Yard on the morning of Nov. 30, 1805, by full military honors and a crowd of curious onlookers. The curious were not to be disappointed by the appearance of the first Muslim envoy to the United States – a large figure with a full dark beard dressed in robes of richly embroidered fabrics and a turban of fine white muslin.

Over the next six months, this exotic representative from a distant

and unfamiliar culture would add spice to the Washington social season but also test the diplomatic abilities of President Thomas Jefferson and his administration.

The backdrop to this state visit was the ongoing conflict between the United States and the Barbary states, autonomous provinces of the Ottoman Empire that rimmed the Mediterranean coast of North Africa. Soon after the Revolutionary War and the consequent loss of the British navy's protection, American merchant vessels had become prey for Barbary corsairs.

Jefferson was outraged by the demands of ransom for civilians captured from American vessels and the Barbary states' expectation of annual tribute to be paid as insurance

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MONTICELLO



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against future seizures. He took an uncharacteristically hawkish position against the prevailing thought that it was cheaper to pay tribute than maintain a navy to protect shipping from piracy.

The crisis with Tunis erupted when the *USS Constitution* captured Tunisian vessels attempting to run the American blockade of Tripoli. The bey of Tunis threatened war and sent Mellimelli to the United States to negotiate full restitution for the captured vessels and to barter for tribute.

Jefferson balked at paying tribute but accepted the expectation that the host government would cover all expenses for such an emissary. He arranged for Mellimelli and his 11 attendants to be housed at a Washington hotel, and rationalized that the sale of the four horses and other fine gifts sent by the bey of Tunis would cover costs. Mellimelli's request for "concubines" as a part of his accommodations was left to Secretary of State James Madison. Jefferson assured one senator that obtaining peace with the Barbary powers was important enough to "pass unnoticed the irregular conduct of their ministers."

Despite whispers regarding his conduct, Mellimelli received invitations to numerous dinners and balls, and according to one Washington hostess was "the lion of the season." At the president's New Year's Day levee the Tunisian envoy provided "its most brilliant and splendid spectacle," and added to his melodramatic image at a later dinner party hosted by the secretary of state. Upon learning that the Madisons were unhappy at being childless, Mellimelli flung his "magical" cloak around Dolley Madison and murmured an incantation that promised she would bear a male child. His conjuring, however, did not work.

Differences in culture and customs stirred interest on both sides. Mellimelli's generous use of scented rose oil was noted by many of those who met him, and guards had to be posted outside his lodgings to turn away the curious. For his part, the Tunisian was surprised at the social freedom women enjoyed in America and was especially intrigued by several delegations of Native Americans



Ivory needle case, said to be a gift to Martha Jefferson Randolph from Mellimelli.

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from the western territories then visiting Washington. Mellimelli inquired which prophet the Indians followed: Moses, Jesus Christ or Mohammed. When he was told none of them, that they worshiped “the Great Sprit” alone, he was reported to have pronounced them “vile hereticks.”

Mellimelli was in Washington during Ramadan, a month-long period in which Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset. To accommodate his guest’s religious obligation, Jefferson’s invitation to the President’s House on Dec. 9 changed the time of dinner from the usual “half after three” to “precisely at sunset.”

At the same time Mellimelli was enlivening Washington society he was engaged in serious diplomatic exchanges with Jefferson and Madison. They agreed upon restitution for the captured Tunisian vessels but still grappled with the issue of tribute. Ultimately, Mellimelli used a tactic that appealed to the Americans’ humanity: He said that that if he failed in his mission he would be beheaded upon his return home. The Americans refused to yield to the idea of tribute, but in a meeting of the Cabinet it was agreed to send to Tunis gifts equivalent in cost to those sent to the United States by the bey.

Mellimelli and his retinue left Washington in May 1806 and traveled up the East Coast to Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston, raising many eyebrows along the way. The ambassador sailed home from Boston in September.

When Jefferson received “an uncommonly friendly letter from the Bey” dated Feb. 27, 1807, he concluded that the ambassador’s report had been accepted favorably in Tunis.

While Mellimelli’s visit did pique cross-cultural curiosity and avert the immediate threat of war with Tunis, cultural differences would continue to intrude upon the relationship between the United States and the Barbary world.

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