PIRATES *VS.* PRESS GANGS:

The Battle for the Atlantic

Piratas vs. Bandos de Recrutamento: A Batalha pelo Atlântico

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ABSTRACT

Pirates in the Atlantic Ocean have excited imaginations ever since they stole from merchant ships and battled naval vessels in the Age of Sail. But pirates also illustrate an underappreciated process in the development of modern states and empires: the struggle between state and non-state actors to establish a monopoly of violence on the high seas. This essay traces this contest over violence in three stages: (1) the challenge posed by English pirates to Europe's dominant imperial power, Spain, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; (2) the threat made by these same pirates to the emerging British Empire in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries; and (3) the successful efforts of the British state to exert control over the Atlantic through state-sponsored forms of piracy, privateers and press gangs, in the eighteenth century. The British established naval supremacy and consolidated imperial control over the Atlantic by monopolizing the same violent methods once used by pirates.

Keywords: Pirate, privateer, press gang, impressment, navy, modern state, violence, Max Weber.

RESUMO

Os piratas instigam a imaginação coletiva desde quando saqueavam navios mercantes e lutavam por embarcações no Oceano Atlântico, durante a Idade da Vela. Não obstante, os piratas também contribuem para ilustrar um processo por vezes subestimado no estudo do desenvolvimento dos Estados e Impérios modernos: a luta entre atores estatais e não estatais para estabelecer o monopólio da violência no alto-mar. Este ensaio retoma esta disputa em torno da violência, dividindo-a em três blocos: no primeiro, o desafio imposto pelos piratas ingleses ao poder imperial dominante da Europa nos séculos XVI e XVII, a Espanha; depois, a ameaça feita por esses mesmos piratas ao emergente Império Britânico no final do século XVII e início do século XVIII; e, por fim, os esforços bem-sucedidos do Estado britânico para exercer controle sobre o Atlântico, lançando mão de formas de pirataria, de corsários e grupos de recrutamento patrocinados pelo Estado, no século XVIII. Assim, pretende-se apresentar como os britânicos estabeleceram a supremacia naval e consolidaram o controle imperial sobre o Atlântico, monopolizando os mesmos métodos violentos usados pelos piratas.

Palavras-chave: Pirata, Corsário, Bandos de Recrutamento, Alistamento Compulsório, Marinha, Estado Moderno, Violência, Max Weber.

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Everyone loves pirates. From young children to grown adults, people of all ages can find something to appreciate in pirates, like the fictional Captain Jack Sparrow from the Disney film franchise, *Pirates of the Caribbean.* This widespread interest in pirates begs the question: why are pirates so popular? After all, pirates broke the law and did many reprehensible things. We romanticize pirates in the past, but there is not much sympathy for pirates operating today. Why, then, do we celebrate pirates from the past, particularly from the Age of Sail?

I will explore this question by tracing the history of pirates primarily in the English-speaking North Atlantic. In doing so, it is important to recognize that many of these same pirates also occasionally sailed in the South Atlantic and disrupted Spanish and Portuguese colonial shipping and settlements. Indeed, the early colonial history of Brazil features a rotating cast of French, Dutch, and English pirates (FRANÇA & HUE, 2014; SÁ, 2015).

The narrative arc of the history of pirates in the North Atlantic includes three stages, each providing important clues for why we romanticize them. Pirates were always the underdogs in the larger battle to control the seas. In the first stage, beginning in the sixteenth century and stretching into the seventeenth century, pirates challenged the major colonial power in the Atlantic, Spain. These early pirates can also be thought of as privateers. Privateers were pirates who had some official legal sanction from the monarch or state, such as letters of marque.

These English pirates/privateers were so successful that they became a threat to the major colonial power in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Britain. Indeed, in this second stage of this history, Britain had to wage a war on some of the same pirates who had helped it to supplant Spain for imperial supremacy in the Atlantic. This is the historical context for *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

In the third and final stage of this history, covering the bulk of the eighteenth century, the British state exerted control over the Atlantic through state-sponsored forms of piracy: privateers and press gangs. Press gangs were groups of men used by the British navy to “impress,” or force, seamen into naval service. We will see that the British state perfected the methods of the pirates to consolidate imperial control over the Atlantic.

Thus, pirates are not only fun, but they can help us to understand large historical processes, particularly the growth of the modern state and early empires. From the perspective of the Atlantic, the key condition for the growth of the state was a monopoly on violence. The idea has roots in Jean Bodin’s *Les Six livres de la République* (1576) and Thomas Hobbes’s *Leviathan* (1651), but it was most developed by Max Weber in his underappreciated political writings. In his work, *Politics as a Vocation* (1919), Weber argued that “a state is a human community that (successfully) claims the *monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory.” (WEBER, 1946, p. 78)[1].

Here I will expand the definition of "territory" to include the Atlantic Ocean to highlight the usefulness of Weber's concept for tracing the rise of the British Empire. Without establishing a monopoly on violence in the Atlantic, the island nation of England could never have realized its imperial ambitions.

Of course, Weber's theory cannot explain everything about the growth of the modern state and early empires. These developments also went hand-in-hand with the growth of capitalism. But, in consolidating violence in the Atlantic, the British state did not engage simply in class exploitation, as explained in Marxist theory.[2] The state confronted all challenges to its authority and exploited any resource and advantage to maintain its power. At sea, this meant defeating pirates and beating them at their own game: stealing the skilled labor of seamen to secure and extend the power of the state.

The English "Sea Dogs"

Let's begin with the first period in which pirates helped the weak English state to triumph over mighty Spain. The Spanish first attracted the attention of other European countries and their pirates following the conquest of the Aztec Indians in present-day Mexico by Hernán Cortés in 1519-1521. The Spanish soon followed Cortés's conquest by discovering fabulous silver mines in Central and South America. Between 1500 and 1650, by official count, 181 tons of gold and 16,000 tons of silver reached Spain from the New World (ELLIOT, 1989, p. 19).

As early as 1525, Spanish galleons carrying colonial riches traveled together in convoys for protection. By 1561, the bi-annual flota (or fleet system) left Spain in every January and August, and ships landed at different Spanish colonial ports. For the return trip to Spain, the galleons first converged at Havana before embarking in a convoy back to Europe. The entire journey took a minimum of eight weeks – a long time to stay on guard against potential enemies (ELLIOT, 1989, p. 19-21).

Before the English, French pirates were the first to feast on the riches of Spain's New World empire. Spain and France fought an intermittent war against each other in the first half of the 16th century. During this period, particularly between 1530 and 1550, French pirates attacked Spanish galleons. By 1559, the two counties negotiated a peace, and French pirates turned their attention to Portuguese Brazil (LANE, 2016, p. 15; 22-24).

Just as French piracy declined in the North Atlantic, a new monarch ascended the English throne. Queen Elizabeth I ruled England from 1558 to 1603. Two forces converged in Elizabeth's reign to promote piracy: (1) England's weakness, particularly compared to Spain; and (2) Elizabeth's outsized ambitions for English growth and imperial expansion.

England was too weak to challenge Spain through traditional warfare, so Elizabeth turned to merchant ship captains and piracy to make war on the Spanish Empire. These men, known as Elizabeth's "sea dogs," included most famously John Hawkins and Francis Drake. They blurred the line between pirate and privateer because they had Elizabeth's support, but they also pursued independent actions purely in their self-interest.[3]

Sir Francis Drake was the most celebrated of Elizabeth's sea dogs and led multiple incursions into the Spanish Caribbean. He began as nothing more than a parasite, an irritant, but then he began to inflict real damage to Spain's finances and imperial interests. In 1572, Drake accomplished his first great act of piracy by stealing the annual shipment of Spanish treasure from Peru. To reach the Atlantic, ships departing from Peru had to land at the Isthmus of Panama and travel by land to the Atlantic port town of Nombre de Dios. Drake surprised the mule convoy as it carried the king's treasure to port. For England (and himself), Drake secured a small fortune in silver and gold.

How does one follow up such an act? In December 1577, Drake left England with 164 men and boys on four ships on what was to become known as the "Famous Voyage." He returned almost three years later as the first Englishman, and the first European since Magellan, to circumnavigate the globe. Drake was not just a tourist. He returned to England with a fortune totaling more than 1 million English pounds, much of it taken from Spanish vessels and settlements.

Elizabeth's sea dogs were no longer just parasites. They posed a major threat to Spain's status as Europe's dominant financial and imperial power. The last 18 years of Elizabeth's reign, from 1585 to 1603, were marked by open war between Spain and England. Each year in this period, dozens of English ships searched for prizes in the Atlantic.

In 1585, Drake left England with a massive fleet of 22 vessels and 2,300 men. Pirate fleets were starting to resemble small navies. Drake's fleet missed the main treasure convoy sailing from the Caribbean, but in 1586 it sacked Santo Domingo (the present-day capital of the Dominican Republic) and attacked Cartagena (in present-day Columbia). Drake's latest exploits inspired a fresh round of English imitators and new Spanish defenses.

The actions of Drake and the other English sea dogs also led to a massive Spanish response, the famous Armada of 1588. King Felipe Philip II dispatched a fleet of 130 ships carrying 18,000 soldiers to exterminate the English pest once and for all. The English deflected the Armada in the English Channel and benefitted from severe storms in the North Seas that helped to scatter Spanish ships. In English retellings of

the event, a “Protestant wind” rescued England. An English commemorative medal stated, “God breathed and they were scattered” (MATTINGLY, 1959, p. 390).

In the 1580s and 1590s, the Dutch and occasionally the French also went to war with Spain and Portugal (which was now under Spanish Habsburg rule). In addition, the union of the Spanish and Portuguese crowns under Philip II led to the first wave of English privateers attacking Brazil (SÁ, 2015, p. 28-38). Ultimately, the combined toll of the wars exhausted the Spanish empire. In 1598, Spain made peace made with France; in 1604 with England; and in 1607 with the Netherlands.

Meanwhile, Drake never again equaled his earlier success. In late 1595, Spanish gunners from El Morro Castle at Havana shot a cannonball through the cabin of Drake’s flagship, and he survived. But a few weeks later, in January 1596, he died of dysentery at age 55 while anchored off the coast of Portobelo (in present-day Panama).

After Elizabeth’s death in 1603, England focused on building permanent settlements under King James I. English piracy did not disappear in the seventeenth century, but it did shift in strategy. Instead of emanating from England, pirates started to come from English colonial settlements in the western hemisphere. Colonial governors, particularly in New York, South Carolina, and Jamaica, sponsored pirates. Governors benefitted from the pirate loot and received maritime protection that the still weak English navy could not provide.

Sir Henry Morgan is the figure that best captures this transition to piracy based in the western hemisphere, particularly the Caribbean. Morgan also helped to start the reputation for pirates enjoying a libertine lifestyle marked by eating, drinking, dancing, whoring, and gambling without concern for strict social rules far from the authority and hierarchy of the imperial center in London.[4]

In the 1650s, Morgan first came to the Caribbean, possibly as part of Oliver Cromwell’s attempt to conquer Spanish colonial settlements, known as the “Western Design.” By the 1660s, Morgan received letters of marque from different Jamaican governors to attack Spanish settlements. The men who sailed with Morgan became known as buccaneers, and he inspired great loyalty in large part because of his generosity. He established an incredibly democratic pay structure for the time in which he received one-hundredth of all prizes, while the rest was divided into equal shares among his men. At the time, captains often took more than half of all prizes.

In 1670, Morgan was too ambitious. He attacked Panama, violating a peace treaty between England and Spain. Morgan was arrested and sent to London, but in the meantime English-Spanish relations deteriorated again. Morgan was knighted and sent back to Jamaica to be the Lieutenant Governor! Now the pirates were running

the colony. Morgan only survived in political power for a few years before he fell out of favor with the Jamaican governor and council. Among other things, he was condemned for rowdy drunkenness. Morgan died in 1688, possibly from liver disease.

The Golden Age of Piracy

As mentioned, Morgan was a transitional character. He helped to introduce the libertine, egalitarian pirate lifestyle that would become famous, but he operated mostly with legal authority. That would change with the generation of pirates who followed Morgan at the end of the 17th century and start of the 18th century, a period known as the "Golden Age of Piracy." In this, the second stage of our story, the Spanish further declined as an imperial power, and Britain rose to establish maritime supremacy in the Atlantic. Pirates thus targeted British shipping and trade goods. They became a threat to the very empire that they had helped to establish.

Captain William Kidd was another transitional figure in this turn from legal privateering to illegal pirating. Born in Scotland, Kidd settled in New York City as a young man. As with Morgan in Jamaica, Kidd served as a pirate/privateer for New York governors. He targeted more French ships than Spanish vessels, as France became England's foremost rival.

Kidd was so good at his craft of piracy that the English government chose him for a special mission to hunt other pirates who had been attacking English East India Company ships in the Indian Ocean. He did not get off to a promising start. In the spring of 1696, Kidd embarked from London and sailed down the River Thames in his aptly named vessel, the *Adventure Galley*. Kidd's ship passed a royal yacht, yet the *Adventure Galley* did not follow the custom of dipping its colors (flags) in deference. Instead, when the yacht fired a warning shot, Kidd's crew mooned (exposed their bottoms) the royal vessel.

Kidd must have found the gesture amusing because his crew did it again to another royal vessel before entering the English Channel. But this time the royal ship stopped the *Adventure Galley* and impressed (forced into service) several members of Kidd's crew (RITCHIE, 1986, p. 60-62). After raising a new crew, Kidd finally journeyed to the Indian Ocean. Yet, instead of hunting pirates as ordered, he engaged in piracy by taking several merchant prizes. The English East India Company dispatched a flood of complaints about Kidd's behavior to London.

Rather than return to England, Kidd fled to the American colonies. There he hoped to receive sanction from one of his former patrons, the Earl of Bellomont, who then served as governor of New York. Instead, Bellomont had Kidd arrested in 1699 and sent back to London, where he was charged for his misdeeds in the Indian Ocean. The English courts found him guilty of murder and five counts of piracy. In May 1701, Kidd was hanged at "Execution Dock" in Wapping (on London's East Side). As a warning to other pirates, Kidd's body was left hanging over the Thames for three years!

Today, historians continue to debate Kidd's legal case. He seemed to get caught in the blurred boundary between legal privateer and illegal pirate.[5] What is clear is that his case represented the opening salvo in what became known as the War on Pirates. Until declaring victory in 1726, the British Royal Navy targeted hundreds of pirates who had spread across the emerging British Empire, from the West Indies (Caribbean) to the East Indies (India). This war on piracy marked a significant moment in the rise of the modern state and the British Empire. In what became one its defining features, the state sought a monopoly on violence and war-making on the Atlantic Ocean.

The War on Pirates began in earnest following the end of another conflict, the War of the Spanish Succession (1702-1713). The Peace of Utrecht in 1713 helped to spawn the height of the Golden Age of Piracy in the Caribbean (1716-1726). The peace left thousands of navy sailors unemployed as the British navy demobilized. To make a living, many of these enterprising seamen turned to piracy (REDIKER, 2001, p. 1-37). In Philadelphia, a customs official warned: "All the news of America is, the swarming of pirates not only on these coasts, but all the West Indies over, which doth ruin trade ten times worse than a war" (TAYLOR, 2001, p. 297).

By 1716, colonial authorities estimated that at least 2,000 pirates operated in the West Indies and along North America's Atlantic seaboard (TAYLOR, 2001, p. 297). This was the age of Jack Sparrow, when pirates carried a flag featuring a skull and crossbones. Known as the Jolly Roger (a term for a carefree fellow), the flag served as a warning to merchant ships. By flying the Jolly Roger, pirates provided an opportunity for merchant ship captains to surrender. If they did not surrender, pirates would raise a red flag; this meant war (PRINGLE, 1953, p. 124-125).

Most pirates followed this and other protocols. Their behavior reflected the sentiment phrased so well in the Bob Dylan song, "Absolutely Sweet Marie": "To live outside the law you must be honest." Indeed, pirates followed a certain code of ethics (referred to as the "Pirate Code" in *Pirates of the Caribbean*). Pirate ships were early models of democratic governance. Simple constitutions defined the rights and duties of crewmen, rules for the handling of disputes, and incentive and insurance payments to insure that crewmen would act bravely in battle. Crews often elected their own captains and quartermasters. Pirate captains usually received only twice the share of prizes given to ordinary crewmen. By contrast, privateer captains typically received fourteen as much. In addition, many pirate ships handled disputes according to a quasi-legal system that included a jury of crewmen (REDIKER, 2001, p. 60-102).

In their behavior and democratic ethics, pirates countered the type of hierarchy evident in merchant and navy ships and the British Empire more generally. Moreover, pirates seemed to have far more fun. The Caribbean pirate Bartholomew "Black Bart" Roberts contrasted piracy with the merchant service, where "there is thin Commons, low Wages, and hard Labour; in this [piracy], Plenty and Satiety, Pleasure and Ease, Liberty and Power... No, *a merry Life and a short one*, shall be my motto" (DEFOE,

1972, p. 244). Roberts lived out his creed. After looting some 40,000 moidores from the Portuguese treasure fleet off Brazil in 1719, he was killed off the coast of Africa by British navy pirate hunters just three years later (LANE, 2016, p. 201-202).

The most famous pirate of this golden age was Edward Teach, better known as Blackbeard. His appearance was key to this legend, as he famously lit his beard on fire to intimidate his enemies! The 1724 book *A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates*, published under the pseudonym Charles Johnson, includes a memorable description of Blackbeard:

> So our Heroe, Captain *Teach*, assumed the Cognomen of *Black-beard*, from that large Quantity of Hair, which, like a frightful Meteor, covered his whole Face, and frightened *America* more than any Comet that has appeared there a long Time. This Beard was black, which he suffered to grow of an extravagant Length; as to Breadth, it came up to his Eyes; he was accustomed to twist it with Ribbons, in small Tails, after the Manner of our Ramilies Wiggs, and turn them about his Ears (DEFOE, 1972, p. 84).

Blackbeard, like other leading pirates, had his own version of the Jolly Roger. His flag portrayed a skeleton piercing a heart with a spear, all while toasting the devil. Much of Blackbeard's strategy depended on bluster and intimidation. He never actually killed a captive. He persuaded most crewmen from captured ships to join his cause, rather than conscript them as did other pirates.

Still, Blackbeard posed a threat to the growing commercial wealth of the British Empire. The Virginia governor Alexander Spotswood resolved to end raids on commerce by the famous pirate. In 1718, Spotswood sponsored a party of soldiers and sailors to capture Blackboard, which they did after fierce fighting off the coast of North Carolina. He was executed and his head was severed and carried on the bowspirit (the forward-most point) of a naval vessel as proof of his death (PRINGLE, 1953, p. 189-209).

Two other famous pirates in the golden age were the women Anne Bonny and Mary Read. Bonny was born in Ireland and later settled with her family in South Carolina. She married a poor sailor named James Bonny, whom she eventually left for John "Calico Jack" Rackham, captain of the pirate sloop *Revenge*.[6]

Read was born illegitimately in England to a widow of a sea captain. When her older brother died, Read's mother began dressing her as a boy. She became a sailor and later joined the British army. Read fell in love and married a Flemish soldier, possibly during the War of the Spanish Succession.

Unfortunately, Read's husband died, so she returned to the sea as a sailor. She eventually ended up joining Rackham's crew on the *Revenge*. Rackham and Anne Bonny both thought that Read was a man until later finding out the truth. In November

1720, a pirate hunter attacked the *Revenge*. The men were too drunk to fight, but Bonny and Read held off the men as long as they could before surrendering.

The Jamaican colonial government sentenced Rackham's crew to death by hanging, but Read and Bonny both "pleaded their bellies" (asked for mercy because they were pregnant). They were given a temporary stay of execution until they gave birth. Read died in jail, possibly of fever during childbirth. We do not have clear records of what happened to Bonny.

These unfavorable outcomes for Blackbeard, Anne Bonny, and Mary Read are emblematic of the larger War on Pirates. The British state was ultimately successful in its effort to prevent pirates from disabling its colonial commerce. Between 1716 and 1726, the British executed between 400 and 600 pirates. At least twice as many, upwards of a 1,000, died resisting capture. The War on Pirates was not a typical war against a foreign enemy, but it was fundamental to defining the power of the modern British state and empire (TAYLOR, 2001, p. 297).

Privateers and Press Gangs

The War on Pirates did not end piracy in the Atlantic. Instead, the British state appropriated the techniques of pirates to serve its own imperial interests. This state-sponsored piracy marked the third and final stage of the growth of the modern state from a maritime perspective. The British exercised their monopoly of violence in the Atlantic by commissioning privateers and by using press gangs to impress (or force) sailors into service – a practice formerly perfected by pirates in the Caribbean.

Ever since Queen Elizabeth's sea dogs of the sixteenth century, the British had used privateers to advance state interests. The difference by the mid-18th century was that Britain ruled the seas with its navy. The British state used privateers to augment its naval supremacy, not out of necessity. Privateers carried letters of marque from the state, which differentiated them from regular pirates. Otherwise, they exhibited many of the same characteristics, including the pursuit of self-interest. The philosopher Adam Smith called privateering the "lottery" of the sea (SMITH, 1902, p. 179). Even with requirements to share prizes with the crown, mariners had the opportunity to make a quick fortune by privateering.[7]

The British further exercised their monopoly on violence in the Atlantic through another system of state-sponsored piracy: naval impressment. Pirates would often conscript crews, especially in the desperate final years of the War on Pirates. But the practice was perfected by the British Royal Navy and, in turn, served as a motivation for pirates, American colonists and United States citizens, and other opponents of the British Empire.[8]

In the eighteenth century, navy press gangs operated both on land and at sea. Headed by a naval lieutenant, these small groups of seamen had one primary objective: capture the best available seafaring talent. For instruments of violence, press gangs favored cudgels (long clubs) and cutlasses (small swords). They generally avoided using firearms because they did not want to permanently harm potential navy recruits.

On land, Tower Hill in London served as the center of naval recruiting because of its easy access to the River Thames. In earlier centuries, impressed men were actually kept in the Tower of London, but by the eighteenth century the navy kept them in holding vessels on the Thames until placing them on specific ships.

This type of behavior might seem outrageous to us today, but it was perfectly legal in the eighteenth century. Impressment was a legal prerogative of the king, who could command the service of his subjects. The main legal requirements were that navy press gangs could only men who "used the sea" (generally sailors) who were British subjects, and it had to be a time of emergency (usually defined as wartime).

Despite the legal requirement to take sailors, press gangs occasionally preyed on other individuals, especially the poor. For this reason, Marxist historians in the U.S. have argued that naval impressment constituted a classic case of class exploitation. I do not deny that class played a significant role in naval impressment, but I argue that a Weberian model of state development better explains the practice. As mentioned, establishing a monopoly of violence was a key factor in the growth of the modern state. The British state could only establish such a monopoly with the service of thousands of sailors. The British navy had to raise approximately 500,000 seamen to fight in wars of the 18th century. Of this number, about half or 250,000 were impressed (forced into service).

My figures are a conservative estimate, but they still mean that naval impressment was the second most common form of forced labor in the British Empire in the 18th century after slavery. We will never have exact figures because the navy did not usually distinguish between volunteers and pressed men in its records. As the British Admiral Philip Cavendish said in 1741, "They are all volunteers once they find that they can't get away" (Apud. BAUGH, 1965, p. 169).

I contend that class is not sufficient in explaining naval impressment because the state targeted sailors foremost for their skills. The British navy needed skilled mariners to man its fleets. The navy especially prized a group of sailors called able seamen, or topmen. These were experienced mariners who had the skill, strength, and agility to climb up the masts of a warship. A standard 74-gun British warship would carry about 500 sailors, a third of whom would be topmen.

Topmen had to balance, almost like trapeze artists, as they brought in sail – often in horrible conditions. This was a skilled, inelastic labor force; it usually required at least two years of experience at sea to become an able seaman. These are the same type of men who might have sailed in pirate ships earlier in the eighteenth century. They never received the credit that they deserved for fueling the British Empire against their will. The British intellectual Dr. Samuel Johnson famously said, "No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail; for being in a ship is being in a jail, with the chance of being drowned. A man in jail has more room, better food, and commonly better company" (BOSWELL, 1934, p.348).

Ships might have been like jails. But, for sailors, they were home. Their service was crucial to the success of the British Empire. No sailors, no navy; no navy, no empire.

Of course, no sailor wanted to be forced into service. Naval impressment violated the personal freedom and economic liberty of seamen. As a result, they engaged in both violent and non-violent methods of resisting press gangs. Many seamen had ingenious ways of escaping impressment. Sailors used a variety of disguises, and some mariners even cross-dressed as women.

Sailors also engaged in violent resistance against press gangs. Seaport communities throughout the British Empire banded together to drive out press gangs. The practice of impressment was especially unpopular in the American colonies. The British navy could impress American colonists legally because they were British subjects, but doing so nearly always resulted in riots. Anti-impressment riots were the most common form of violent resistance against British imperial rule until the American revolutionary era in the 1760s and 1770s.

In November 1747, a riot against British Admiral Charles Knowles was the largest protest in the American colonies between the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the Stamp Acts riots of 1765. Like so many British naval officers, Knowles arrived in Boston short of men. He responded by taking about 50 seamen from ships in Boston Harbor. It was not the number of men that mattered, but rather the type of sailors. Many of them were local seamen from Massachusetts, which angered residents of the colony.[9]

For three days, the crowd ruled Boston. The colony's governor, William Shirley, fled to an island in the harbor as the crowd roamed the streets and even kidnapped some of Admiral Knowles's men (an example of role reversal). The uproar only ended when Knowles aligned his fleet to fire on Boston, saying, "By God I'll now see if the Kings Government is not as good as a Mob."

The crowd returned Knowles's men, and he released the Massachusetts sailors. But the Knowles Riot, as it became known, left an important legacy. After the riot, Bostonians debated when, if ever, mob activity was legitimate. The strongest advocate

for riots was the 25-year old Samuel Adams. This was a generation before he would become a famous "brewer patriot" in the American Revolution. In 1747, Adams was fresh out of Harvard College, where his master's thesis explored when it was legitimate to resist government authority.

The Knowles Riot gave Adams a real-life laboratory to test the ideas from his education. He wrote a series of essays that used the philosophy of John Locke to defend riots in certain circumstances. When the government did not properly protect its people, as in the case of Admiral Knowles forcing men into service, it reduced human relations to a state of nature. According to Adams, citizens had a natural right to resist. This was the first time that this type of Lockean reasoning was used to defend riots in the American colonies. Later, this type of ideology would become a hallmark of the American Revolution.

During the American Revolutionary War, the new United States turned to privateering to challenge British naval supremacy. In this way, history repeated itself. Americans used privateers for the same reason that Elizabeth had sponsored men like Francis Drake. America still did not have a proper navy, so it had to use piracy out of weakness.

During the American Revolution, the U.S. commissioned about 800 ships as privateers, compared to just a handful of actual naval vessels. American privateers captured an estimated 600 British merchant ships and a few naval vessels. Not surprisingly, the British referred to the Americans as "pirates" (PATTON, 2008).

The Americans also decried the "piratical" practices of the British. The Royal Navy continued to impress American seamen throughout the Revolutionary War. The practice then renewed during Britain's wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France between 1793 and 1815. I estimate that British press gangs captured approximately 10,000 American citizen-sailors during this period (BRUNSMAN, 2010, p. 557-586).

The British did not claim the legal right to impress U.S. citizens because they were no longer British subjects. But individual navy press gangs claimed that they could not tell the difference between British and American sailors at sea. The two groups still looked alike and talked similar. British seamen also found it very convenient to hide on American ships.

The British practice of naval impressment would eventually cause a second war between the U.S. and Britain, known in America as "The War of 1812." Before the war, the most ambitious attempt by the U.S. government to protect its sailors was to issue them documents called citizenship protections. A 1796 law instructed customs collectors in American ports to issue U.S. citizenship protections to seamen before they set sail on the high seas. A citizenship protection usually included a symbol of the United States, such as an eagle, a sailor's name, his point of embarkation, and a list of his distinctive physical features (BRUNSMAN, 2010, p. 574-575).

Although well intentioned, the protection policy did little to prevent British press gangs from capturing American citizens. The reason is that British sailors also tried to avoid impressment by obtaining their own U.S. citizenship protections. As a result, British press gangs did not trust the documents. Today a file in the British National Archives contains more than a hundred fake U.S. citizenship protections confiscated from British seamen (NOTES ON AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP PROTECTIONS, 1814, p. 1/3857).

In June 1812, the United States declared war against Britain over the practice of impressment and other grievances. The war did not go particularly well for America, as Britain invaded Washington, D.C., and burned down the original White House and Capitol Building. Ultimately, the war ended in a tie. With Napoleon defeated in 1814, both sides decided that the war was no longer worth fighting.[10]

Conclusion: Beware of the Pirates

Even though the United States only tied Britain, Americans acted like they had won the war because they had stood up to the great British power. To borrow from the scholar Benedict Anderson, early Americans imagined themselves as a community of free citizens in an Atlantic world of impressed British subjects (ANDERSON, 1991). This young nation of "pirates" had stood up to the dominant empire of its time, just as England had once stood up to Spain. The U.S. was in the process of monopolizing violence within its borders and against its own citizens on the way to becoming an empire in its own right.

Historians should always be cautious about commenting on current events. But these stories highlighting America's early weakness are instructive as the United States today attempts to leverage its power in new and disturbing ways. As we have seen, the U.S. once struggled to secure the free passage of its goods and people. Now, as a world power, America is trying to restrict the free movement of goods and people from other countries.

History might not always exactly repeat itself. But, as the American writer Mark Twain supposedly observed, history does rhyme. We can detect common patterns in human relations and institutions going back centuries and millennia. If we cannot learn anything from the past, why study history?

Among other lessons, the history of piracy in the Atlantic teaches that superpowers should make peace with pirates when possible and war only when necessary. Most of all, powers should avoid stooping to the same level as their enemies. Otherwise, what can they gain other than becoming the King Pirates? History provides a warning: without thoughtful diplomacy, the pirate one day could become a superpower the next.

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Notes

1 See also Anter (2014, p. 25-36); Dusza (1989, p. 71-105). For other applications of the concept of monopolizing violence in state development, see: Tilly (1995, p. 169-91) and Hobsbawm (2000).

2 For a Marxist interpretation of modern state development, see: Linebaugh & Rediker (2000) and Rediker (1987).

3 The following paragraphs are based on Bicheno (2014); Lane (2016, p. 35-55); and Pringle (1953, p. 34 – 39).

4 The following paragraphs are based on Talty (2007); and Pringle (1953, p. 67-80).

5 For a defense of Kidd, see Zacks (2002).

6 My account of Read and Bonny is based on Defoe (1972, p. 103-126).

7 For an overview of British privateering, see Starkey (1990).

8 The following paragraphs are based on my study, Brunsman (2013).

9 For the Knowles Riot, see Brunsman (2007, p. 324 – 366); Brunsman (2013, p. 210-240); and Lax & Pencak (1976, p. 163-216).

10 For the War of 1812, see Hickey (1989); Taylor (2010); and Gilje (2013).

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