



U.S. History and Global Studies: Classroom topics and resources related to the Tangier American Legation in Morocco

1) The start of U.S.-Moroccan relations, pre-Legation

Related topics: U.S. diplomatic history, history of U.S. relations in the Middle East and North Africa; U.S. trade and shipping concerns in the late 18th century.

Morocco was one of the first countries in the world — possibly the very first — to recognize the United States. Morocco took this step following America's declared independence, and even before the end of the American Revolution. According to the U.S. Embassy website in Morocco:

"The Sultan [Mohammed ben Abdallah, or Mohammed III] issued a declaration on December 20, 1777, announcing that all vessels sailing under the American flag could freely enter Moroccan ports. The Sultan stated that orders had been given to his corsairs to let the ship "des Americains" and those of other European states with which Morocco had no treaties - Russia, Malta, Sardinia, Prussia, Naples, Hungary, Leghorn, Genoa, and Germany - pass freely into Moroccan ports. There they could "take refreshments" and provisions and enjoy the same privileges as other nations that had treaties with Morocco. This action, under the diplomatic practice of Morocco at the end of the 18th century, put the United States on an equal footing with all other nations with which the Sultan had treaties. By issuing this declaration, Morocco became one of the first states to acknowledge publicly the independence of the American Republic."

Questions for students to explore:

Elementary School level (ES):

- What is an Embassy?
- Why would a country want to have embassies in other countries?
- What is an Ambassador?
- Where is Morocco on the map?
- How close is it to Europe?
- How close to the United States?
- Can you find the Straits of Gibraltar?
- In the late 1700s, why would the United States have been interested in friendship with a country that controlled these Straits?

Middle School level (MS)

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- What is the difference between an Embassy, a Consulate, and a Legation? (Hint: Legations don't really exist anymore, they were more a historical entity.)
- In the past, rulers of Morocco were sometimes called Sultans and sometimes called Emperors. What are the definitions of these terms?
- What is the head of the Moroccan government called now?
- The Straits of Gibraltar have been described as an important strategic location, and therefore important to many countries — not just those located near to the Straits. Why would these Straits be strategically important?
- What are some other spots around the world that are considered strategically important?
- Morocco lies between Europe and West Africa. In the 1700s and early 1800s, pirates from Morocco, Algeria, and Libya operated from various North African ports to raid commercial ships. Why would this have been a problem for the U.S. at that time?
- What kinds of commercial trade existed between the U.S., Europe, and Africa?

High School level (HS)

- Ships and boats have long been one of the major means by which goods were transported around the world. Before the invention of the railroad, ocean and river shipping was even more important. Why would Morocco, especially the northern zone around Tangier, have been important to global shipping?
- Why would the rulers of Morocco have wanted to promote shipping in and out of its own ports?
- What was the view of Morocco's rulers on the pirates that operated from their territory in the 1700s and 1800s?
- What is Morocco's role today in global shipping?
- Name two major ports in Morocco, and describe what happens to the goods that are shipped there.

2) The first U.S.-Moroccan treaty, signed in 1787

Related topics: U.S. diplomatic history, U.S. relations in North Africa, U.S. role in relation to European colonial expansion, impact of "Barbary Pirates" conflict on trade and shipping

Morocco's Sultan Mohammed Bin Abdallah reached out to the new United States several times between 1777 and 1786, with the intention of establishing agreements on trade and shipping. Growing impatient, he seized a U.S. ship to gain the attention of the United States (while treating its crew very well, and communicating carefully about his intentions). He got the attention he wanted: the U.S. sent its representative to negotiate a treaty, which was signed in 1786 and ratified by Congress in 1787. These events took place against a wider background of threats to foreign shipping from the "Barbary pirates," efforts by European powers to gain a foothold, if not control, in North Africa, and allegations by Morocco that the Europeans were exaggerating the pirate threat for their own purposes.

[Details](#) from the Mount Vernon Historian.

More on the [letters](#) between President George Washington and Emperor (or Sultan) Mohammed ben Abdallah:

Questions for students to explore:

Elementary School:

- What is a Treaty? In United States law, who signs treaties between the U.S. and other countries, and who ratifies (or confirms) them? What are some reasons that countries might want to sign treaties with each other?

Middle School and High School:

- Based on the questions and ideas in the last section, why might the U.S. have wanted to sign a treaty of friendship with Morocco right after we gained our independence?
- What do you know about the role and importance of ships in global commercial trade in the 18th and 19th centuries?
- Why would the United States have been very focused on protecting its shipping to and from Europe? To and from West and Central Africa?
- Why did it take George Washington so long to respond to the Sultan of Morocco's first letter asking for a treaty?
- What did the Sultan do to get George Washington's attention?
- Are you surprised at the American reaction when the Moroccans took that step?
- What do you know about the "Barbary pirates"? Where did they operate, and who did they attack?
- What were the European countries (e.g. France, Britain) doing about the problem, and did the United States want to join them?
- In the U.S. Marines' Hymn, there is a line "from the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli" — how does "the shores of Tripoli" relate to the Barbary pirates?

3) Overview of Legation history

Related topics: U.S. diplomatic history, U.S. relations with North Africa, the Civil War, World War II

Sultan Suleiman bin Mohammed, the son of Mohammed ben Abdallah, continued to encourage trade with the U.S. into the early decades of the 19th century. In 1821, he gave the U.S. Government a building in the old city of Tangier, in northern Morocco, to use as a diplomatic and commercial outpost — in other words, a Legation.

[This excellent article](#) by Graham Cornwell in the Smithsonian Magazine summarizes the Legation's 200-year role in U.S. history.

The Legation still exists, and is the only property on the U.S. national register of historic places that is located outside the United States. The American Legation in Tangier launched its bicentennial celebrations in 2021, commemorating the Sultan's gift to the United States to promote trade, commerce, and diplomatic engagement.

Questions for students to explore:

Elementary School and Middle School:

- Why is it important to preserve (some) old buildings?
- What are some of the ways that preserved historic buildings continue to be used?
- What is the U.S. national register of historic places?
- What are some of the sites in your town or city or state that are in this national register?
- Can you find pictures online of the American Legation building in Tangier, Morocco?
- Which pictures interest you the most?
- Before the invention of the telephone, much less the Internet, how would American diplomats overseas have communicated with their bosses in Washington DC?
- When would the first telegram communication have been possible between Morocco and the United States?

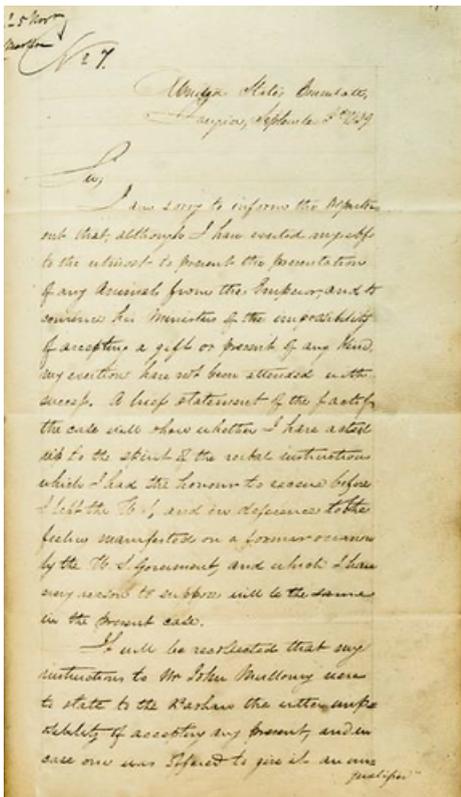
High School:

- Reading Graham Cornwell's article about 200 years of Legation history, what do you think are the most interesting pieces of information? What surprises you?
- Have you ever thought about a career in diplomacy or international relations? Why or why not?
- What do you think it would have been like to live and work in the American Legation in Tangier, back in the 1800s?
- What were the pros and cons of working and living there compared to Washington DC at that time?

4) Early years of the Legation: Problems caused by unusual gifts!

Related topics: U.S.-Moroccan relations, U.S. diplomatic history, cross-cultural challenges; U.S. government rules against gifts and "emoluments"

The story of these unusual gifts (live lions!) is a good way to introduce younger students to the concept of diplomacy, and the different ways countries have related to each other in different times and places. Sultan Suleiman bin Mohammed's nephew, Abd-el-Rahman ben Hisham, became the new Sultan in 1822. Seeking to advance his country's relations with the United States, he initiated a series of dramatic gifts to the President and Congress. Two different U.S. Consuls struggled to cope with his gifts of lions.



In 1834, the Sultan presented Tangier U.S. Consul James Leib with a lion and two Arabian horses as gifts for the President. He had to house the lion until he could persuade his superiors to transport it and the horses to the United States. After much debate, Congress passed a resolution calling for the animals to be sold at auction. The "Numidian Lion" fetched \$3,350, with the proceeds being divided between two Washington orphanages.

Leib's successor Thomas Carr was faced with a similar quandary. According to the State Department's Office of the Historian: The Sultan of Morocco presented Carr with two lions and two horses. Congress passed another resolution authorizing the President to "dispose in such time and manner as he shall see fit of all such of the presents as cannot conveniently be deposited or kept in the Department of State, and

cause the proceeds to be placed in the Treasury of the United States." The animals were duly sold when they arrived in Philadelphia in 1840. For years, the scanned letter where Carr plaintively writes of lions eating him out of house and home on his meager Consul's salary has enchanted Legation museum visitors. Especially amusing is the "gift you can't refuse" aspect: giving the lions back would have resulted in the messenger's decapitation! Not an option for a Consul with a conscience.

Questions for students to explore:

Elementary School and Middle School:

- Why do heads of countries give each other gifts? Does this still happen?
- Here's an [article](#) from the Washington Post about remarkable gifts given to presidents that mentions the Legation lions, in passing. What eventually happened to the lions that were given to the U.S. at the Legation? Why did it take a long time to resolve the question of what to do with the lions?

High School:

- Here is a [podcast](#) from the Washington Post that talks about Presidential "emoluments" and the gifts that rulers of one country give to another that can cause ethical and legal problems. It also talks about the Legation lions, of course!
- What do you think about current U.S. laws governing such gifts? Should they be stricter? More lenient? What have our courts said on this topic over the years?

5) The Legation in the Civil War

Related topics: U.S.-European relations during the Civil War; Moroccan support for the Union side

[Read](#) Graham Cornwell's terrific article in Smithsonian Magazine on this little-known but fascinating incident:

Questions for students to explore:

Middle School:

- The European countries did not all support the Union in the American Civil War, especially not at the beginning. What can you find out about the reaction of France and Britain, specifically, to the conflict, and what actions they took?
- What problems did these countries cause for President Lincoln?

High School:

Based on Graham Cornwell's article in the Smithsonian:

- Did the U.S. Consul in Tangier have the legal right to capture and detain the Confederate ship officers?
- What upset the European diplomats most about his actions — was it the violation of diplomatic norms, or their desire to maintain ties to both North and South in the U.S. civil war?
- Why might Morocco have wanted to support the Consul's action?
- Why would Morocco have wanted to placate the Europeans at the same time?

(Answers to these questions are not entirely knowable, but interesting to think about, in the context of the article.)

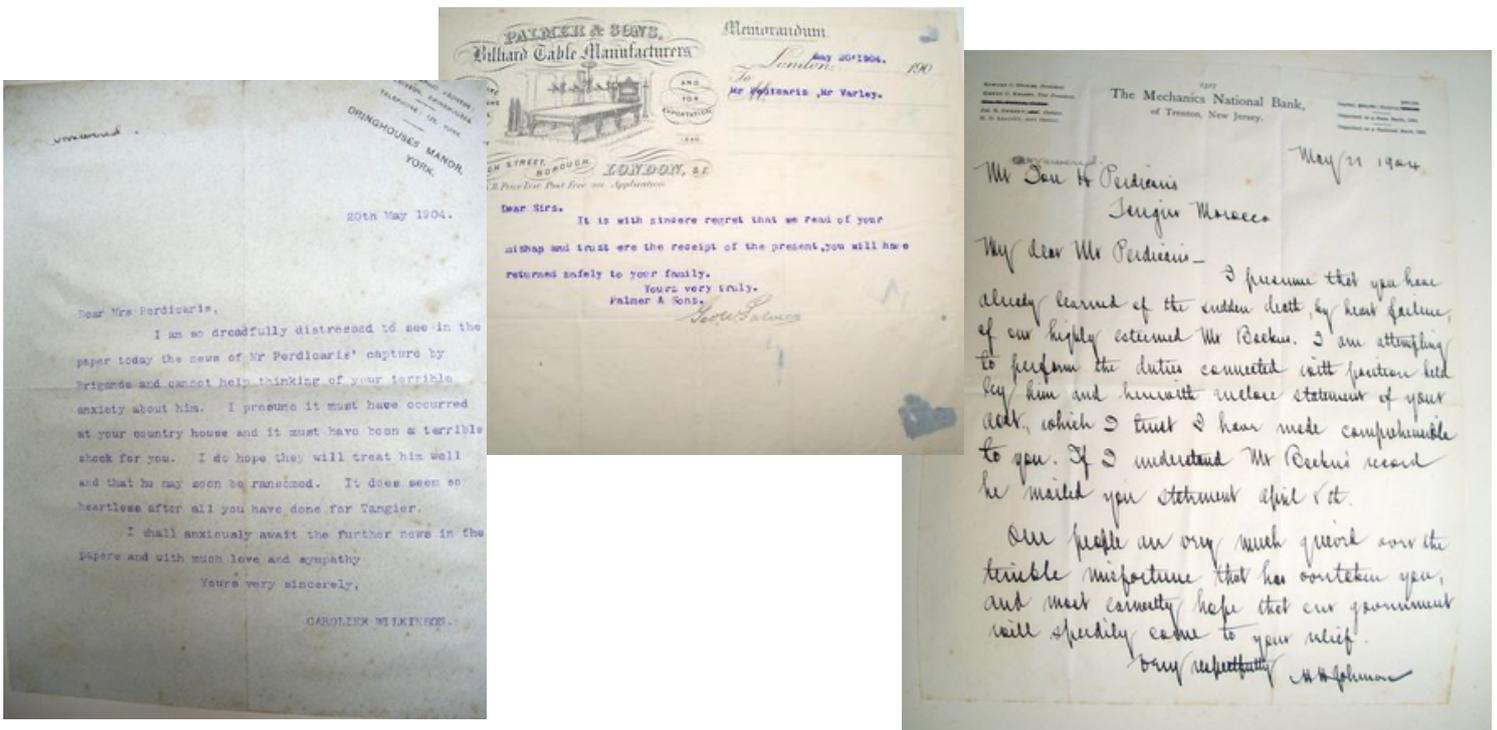
6) President Theodore Roosevelt and the Legation

Related topics: Teddy Roosevelt's "big stick" policy. Also, the influence of dramatic global events — whether real, manufactured, or somewhere in between — on U.S. domestic politics.

The 1904 kidnapping of businessman Ion Perdicaris [in Tangier, Morocco] demonstrated President Theodore Roosevelt's display and use of force. This [Library of Congress guide](#) provides access to materials related to the 'Perdicaris Affair' in the *Chronicling America* digital collection of historic newspapers." Excellent for primary source projects! The Legation's role: U.S. Consul Samuel F. Gummeré, then head of the American Consulate in Tangier, played a key role in negotiating the release of Perdicaris.

Note: Sean Connery and Candace Bergen starred in a [movie](#) loosely based on these events. Unlike in the film version, U.S. Marines did not actually invade Tangier, and Ion Perdicaris was not a beautiful blonde woman. Still, the film effectively portrays the U.S. media circus around this crisis during Teddy Roosevelt's 1904 re-election campaign.

Mr. Ion Perdicaris and his wife's son Cromwell Varley were kidnapped by Moroccan "brigand" and chieftan Moulay Ahmed El Raisuli, in what came to be known – worldwide – as "the Perdicaris Affair." The incident sparked a diplomatic crisis, with U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt dispatching the Atlantic Fleet to Tangier and issuing the ultimatum "Perdicaris Alive or Raisuli Dead," which became his reelection campaign slogan. Letters came pouring into Tangier from around the world as a result of global interest in the situation.



Questions for students to explore:

Elementary School and Middle School:

- Letters were sent from around the world by people who had read about the Perdicaris kidnapping in the newspaper. What international news stories have grabbed the attention of ordinary people lately, here in the U.S.?

High School:

- Raisuli, the so-called “bandit” or “brigand” in the Perdicaris Affair, was a feudal chieftain in Morocco’s northern Rif area who some considered a fighter against a corrupt central government. This article describes the history of Rif rebellions. After reading this article, do you see the Perdicaris Affair differently? If so, how?
- “Wag the Dog” is a movie about a fictional U.S. Administration ginning up a foreign policy crisis in order to win an election. Are there real-life examples where politicians have been accused of exploiting (if not creating) foreign policy crises to boost their image?

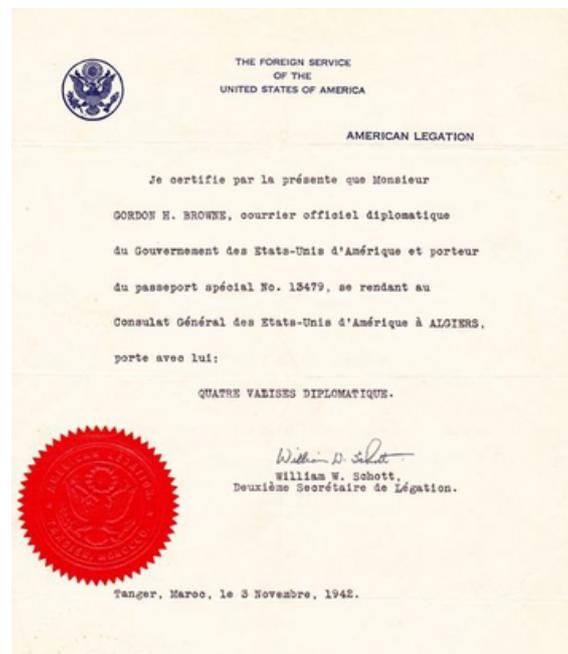
7) World War II: Operation Torch, the Allied Invasion of North Africa

Related topics: The role of North Africa in World War II; the Office of Strategic Services, precursor to the CIA

[Operation Torch](#), the allied invasion of Vichy French North Africa in 1942, enabled the Allies to control North Africa. It played a key role in preparing the way for the Normandy invasion more than a year later.

The U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS) was the intelligence service of the United States during the later part of World War II. One of its first roles was to plan and pave the way for Operation Torch, working under the greatest secrecy. And an OSS team operated out of a tiny, hidden room at the American Legation in Tangier! Apparently the U.S. Consul General at the time — who lived and worked in the Legation building — did not even know that the OSS office was there. In November 2022, the American Legation set up a museum display in the old OSS space, recreating how it would have looked in 1942. You can see some photos of the exhibit [here](#) or through our virtual tour.

The American Legation in Tangier in 1942 was the headquarters of the first OSS foray into a major theatre of war, when it helped prepare the way for Operation Torch, the November 1942 landings in Vichy French North Africa. One of these "glorious amateurs" was Gordon Browne, who carried this innocuous looking document with him on a mission to Algeria. Look at the date: November 3, 1942. Browne is to carry "4 diplomatic pouches" from the American Legation in Tangier to the American Consulate General in Algiers. Only Browne didn't make it as far as Algiers. His mission was to carry "Rebecca" – code name for a radio beacon that would guide paratroopers to a drop zone near Oran – and install it on the eve of the Operation Torch landings.



The incident is dramatically retold in [Hal Vaughan's FDR's 12 Apostles: The Spies Who Paved the Way for the Invasion of North Africa](#): Browne warned: "For God's sake, take it easy, our cargo is delicate... The set is sealed. If it is thrown out of whack, there is nothing we can do about it. I have orders not to let it be captured intact. It is fitted with a self-destruct explosive charge which I can set off at a moment's notice." Finally, on D-Day for Torch, November 7, when the overdue airborne operation suffered a series of disasters, Browne "dragged Rebecca a few yards into the brush, flipped a switch, ran like hell, and watched the lady blow to pieces." For his role in this piece of Operation Torch, Gordon Browne of Tangier was awarded the Medal of Merit. The citation reads: ... for exceptionally meritorious acts on the night of November 7-8, 1942. Gordon Browne, a civilian... volunteered to render this service for the landing of the American paratroop force near Tafaraoui, Algeria. Realizing the consequences if apprehended, disregarding his own safety, he remained with the instrument for four hours under fire, and then upon completion of his mission, assisted in its disposal. The heroic and fearless loyalty of Gordon Browne, who voluntarily jeopardized his life for the success of his country's cause in battle, reflects great credit and glory upon the whole nation. Not bad for a glorious amateur. His later award of a Silver Star notes his profession as "anthropologist." After postwar service in the CIA, Gordon Browne settled in Tangier, where he lived his last years.

Questions for Students to Explore:

Elementary and Middle School:

- Why did the OSS have to operate from a secret hidden office in the Legation?
- What might have happened if news of their work had leaked out?

High School:

- What do you know about the history of intelligence and espionage services of the United States, in wartime and peacetime?
- Why would Operation Torch have “paved the way” in a vitally important way for the later Normandy Invasion of Europe?

8) The Tangier International Zone, and the unusual powers it gave to the U.S. Consulate

Related topic: International zones

The International Zone around Tangier existed from 1924 until its reintegration into independent Morocco in 1956. The International Zone was governed jointly by several European countries, except for a period during which Spain was in charge. Diplomatic entities in the International Zone, including the U.S. Consulate (housed in the Legation building), held unusual powers, including judicial powers. The Consulate had the power to conduct trials — such as in the famous case of “Nylon Sid”.

Questions for students to explore:

High School:

For over 30 years, European powers controlled the northern International Zone of Tangier. For more than 70 years, the U.S. controlled the Panama Canal Zone. The French and British jointly administered the Suez Canal for almost a century.

- What were the factors leading up to the creation of each zone?
- Who benefited from the zone, and how did foreign control hurt or help the “host” country?
- How did the zones differ from each other?
- What happened to end the foreign control of each of these zones?