Pirate Hunting: The Fight against Pirates, Privateers, and Sea Raiders from Antiquity to the Present

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Benerson Little

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sets out to examine “the evolution, function, problems, and prospects of private security operating in the maritime sector.” It suggests that the events of 9/11 were crucial in shifting port-security responsibilities away from the state and onto private industry, “reinterpreting,” as Cullen puts it, maritime actors from passive objects needing state protection to responsible subjects accountable for their own security. This shift has now been extended to ships transiting areas prone to piracy, including Southeast Asia, the Arabian Sea off Somalia, and the Gulf of Guinea. The implications of this new interpretation are enormous, particularly when added to the increasing use of private contractors in a quasi-military role, as exemplified by Blackwater—a dynamic particularly generated by the Iraq conflict. As the market potential of that war zone declined, companies and individuals reportedly started new ventures and new careers in the waters off Somalia.

Understandably, given the book’s focus, few of its essays delve deeply into the strategic and moral issues to which these activities give rise. The editors instead have chosen to emphasize the many practical implications of this development, including the early experience in the Strait of Malacca, by the acknowledged expert, Carolin Liss; the often-violent challenges to ship and fixed-platform operators off Nigeria; the uncertainties and complexities of a legal regime struggling to come to terms with rapid change; the role of private contractors in the security of ports; and the arguments for and against the use of armed guards on ships versus alternative risk-reduction measures that owners need to take into account. Other essays examine the equally complicated questions that arise when private operators take on coast-guard and fishery-protection roles, drawing on examples from Sierra Leone, Somalia, and Puntland.

This is a timely and well-informed introduction to a new industry about which most people—even people familiar with shipping—know relatively little. This veil must be lifted, because the demands for private maritime security are likely to increase in line with the growing economic importance of the seas and the criminally and politically inspired challenges to which that importance gives rise.

MARTIN MURPHY
Alexandria, Virginia


This is Benerson Little’s latest of three books about pirates. In this one he has done a superb job of recounting the violent history that surrounds pirates and raiders and the measures that have been taken to hunt and suppress them. Also, Little has not forgotten privateers, who, depending on available opportunities, easily switched from being pirate hunters to pirates.

Little opens by noting the differences between pirates, who are principally active on the seas, and raiders, who are more associated with attacking from, not on, the water. Additionally, he provides detailed information about pirate and raider ships and about tactics and weapons, which over the centuries progressed from rams, arrows, and spears to cannon and muskets.
The earliest attempts to counter and suppress pirates and raiders were undertaken by navies and armed merchant vessels, which were, in the latter case, fighting for survival. Pirates and raiders, such as the famous Vikings, carried out coastal raids, as well as attacking ships. Assaults from the sea led to the inland movement of many shore settlements, to the construction of fortifications, and to the creation of early-warning systems of watchtowers. Raiders were vulnerable to ambush, cut off from escape and exposing their landing vessels to possible capture and destruction.

Pirate tactics changed with technology and the skills of the hunters. In general, and for a long period in the history of piracy, pirates held the upper hand in terms of ships, vessel ordnance, and individual weapons. However, as navies became more proficient, the end result was that pirates in most cases avoided confrontation with naval vessels.

Over the centuries nonviolent measures to combat piracy were employed, with varying degrees of success. These attempts included antipiracy agreements of the type forged during the Middle Ages by the Cinque Ports (a group of harbor towns on England’s southeast coast) and by the Hanseatic League (city-states on the North Sea and the Baltic). Essentially, these agreements served to deter pirates from one member of the alliance from attacking vessels of another member, state, or port. They also contained provisions that prohibited merchants, and others, from acting as fencers.

As the author points out, notwithstanding nonviolent measures, the best defenses against seagoing criminals have proved to be a combination of a strong, prevailing naval presence and stable governments ashore that are willing and able to deny safe havens.

The author devotes the final part of the book to modern piracy and pirate hunting. He mentions as part of the discussion the piracy that was widespread on the South China Sea in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the more virulent form now present off Somalia. Little sets out many of the difficulties encountered there, what is being done to protect ships transiting the area, and finally, provides suggestions for steps that might be taken to deal with the problem more aggressively.

In summary, Benerson Little has produced a good book that readers with an interest in maritime history and affairs will enjoy.

JACK GOTTSCHALK
Livingston, New Jersey


For a searching and all too often dismaying account of the homeland-security industry that has emerged after 9/11, look no farther. Mueller and Stewart’s chief task is to apply cold analysis to the costs and benefits of homeland-security expenditures. The question, they argue, is not “Does the expense reduce the threat?” but “Is the size of the threat reduction worth the expense?”

Their answer is a resounding no. First, Mueller and Stewart demonstrate that individuals tend to exaggerate greatly the probability of a terrorist attack. They then present evidence, for example, that the risk of dying