



The Long War Against Piracy: Historical Trends (Occasional Papers)

James A Wombwell

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This study surveys the experience of the United States, Great Britain, and other seafaring nations in addressing the problem of piracy at sea, then derives insights from that experience that may be relevant to the suppression of the current surge of piratical activity. Wombwell, a retired naval officer, traces the course of several outbreaks of piracy during the past 300 years in a variety of geographical areas. Although each case varies in its details, Wombwell concludes that enough similarities exist to permit several useful generalizations. Among these are the causes of piracy, the factors that permit the behavior to flourish, and the range of countermeasures that have been available to policymakers seeking to eradicate the problem. When conditions are favorable for piracy to develop, and no strong response is made by the forces of law and order, what began as low-level brigandage often grows to outrageous proportions, ultimately requiring significant military resources to suppress or eliminate the threat posed to legitimate commerce. This a timely work because of the dramatic surge of piratical acts in the Gulf of Aden and off the Horn of Africa in recent years. Although piracy has been a problem for several decades in other international sea lanes, the actions of the Somali pirates have focused world attention on the issue. This study is especially pertinent to the US Army because the historical record clearly indicates that piracy seldom, if ever, has been eradicated solely through naval operations alone. As Wombwell makes abundantly clear, only when nations have acted to remove piracy's enabling conditions ashore through military and/or political means has the scourge of piracy truly been eliminated.

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