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NKU lecture focuses on piracy

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"To the shores of Tripoli" is a line in the "Marine's Hymn" because of pirates.

"The US was in an undeclared war against the Barbary States [now Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya], whose governments sponsored - or at least condoned - pirate raids on merchant shipping and took either part of the cut, or collected protection money from various states, said Dr. Stephen Morillo, the Jane and Frederic M. Hadley Chair in History at Wabash College in Indiana.

Morillo will be the speaker at Wednesday's Northern Kentucky University Military History Lecture Series. His talk, "Barbary Pirates to Somalis: A Veteran's Day Perspective on the World History of Piracy" will be held at 3 p.m. Wednesday in the Eva Farris Auditorium (BEP Center 200).

"Nine marines were indeed involved in the main land action of the war, but all 35 casualties came from those serving in the Navy, as most of the actual fighting involved naval actions, either against other ships or, more commonly, shore bombardment," he said.

Morillo said his interest in pirates was an outgrowth of his interest in maritime and naval history. He has written several books on military history including "War in World History: Society, Technology and War from Ancient Times to the Present."

"Piracy tends to arise where areas having weak, non-existent, or failed hierarchies/states lie next to rich and heavily used segments of the global network of trade," said Morillo. "This has been true since ancient times and continues to be true today in both Somalia and the South China Sea."

Morillo said today's Somali pirates are more similar to the romanticized swashbuckling Caribbean pirates than the Barbary pirates President Jefferson sent the Navy and Marines to fight.

"Barbary pirates operated with the approval and backing of their states, weak and poor as they may have been," he said. "Somali pirates are a product of the failure of the Somali state. The Somalis more closely resemble the pirates of the Caribbean than the Barbary pirates did, in that way."

No matter the cause of piracy, it remains a problem in modern times.

"Piracy continues to take a significant economic toll in today's world, and at times threatens the lives of Americans and others when commercial and cruise ships are attacked or captured by pirates," he said.

"Figuring out how to deal with piracy is a tricky problem because it lies at the awkward intersection of networks and hierarchies, which are organized quite differently and for different purposes. But in all honesty, the other part of the answer is that the image of piracy, especially in its 17th and early 18th century Caribbean form, remains hugely popular as in "Pirates of the Caribbean" because, I think, part of what pirates were trying to achieve still resonates today in a world increasingly dominated by global capitalism."
