

What Young America learned about Islam

Currently much controversy surrounds Islam and its compatibility, or lack thereof, with the Western world. To some, Islam is a religion of peace whose adherents desire nothing more than the way of life enjoyed by others in Western nations. To others, Islam has a strong undercurrent of violence and fundamentally conflicts with Western values of freedom, equality, and tolerance.

In attempting to reach a prudential judgment on the matter, one valuable source of information is history—a study of not only persons and past events involving Islam, but the history of the Western perception of Islam.

In the latter category, there was an [interesting excerpt](#) that appeared in the “Notable & Quotable” section of the *Wall Street Journal* this past December. The excerpt comes from [a letter](#) from John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, who had taken issue with [Tripoli's](#) ambassador regarding the repeated capture and enslavement of American citizens by Muslim pirates (an issue that eventually led, as many of you know, to the [First and Second Barbary Wars](#)):

From a March 28, 1786, letter written by John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, who were American diplomats at the time, to U.S. Secretary of Foreign Affairs John Jay reporting on their conversation in London with the ambassador from Tripoli regarding piracy by the Barbary States:

“We took the liberty to make some enquiries concerning the ground of their pretensions to make war upon nations who had done them no injury, and observed that we considered all mankind as our friends who had done us no wrong, nor had

given us any provocation.

The Ambassador answered us that it was founded on the laws of their Prophet; that it was written in their Koran; that all nations who should not have acknowledged their authority were sinners; that it was their right and duty to make war upon them wherever they could be found, and to make slaves of all they could take as prisoners; and that every Mussulman [Muslim] who was slain in battle was sure to go to Paradise."

Do you think the Ambassador's response to Adams and Jefferson was an exception to the rule of a [generally peaceful religion](#), or representative of the true nature of Islam?