Historical Perspective

Piracy has probably existed since early man first took to the waters. Despite the fact that the ancient Romans referred to the Mediterranean as "Mare Nostrum (literally "Our Sea"), we know from the historical records that the Roman Empire – even at the height of its power during Pax Romana – was unable to rid the Mediterranean of pirates, and that even the mighty Julius Caesar was a prisoner of pirates at one time. Piracy in ancient times was principally a matter of maritime kidnapping for ransom.

In the Middle Ages, Europe was targeted by two pirate groups: the Vikings and the Muslim pirates. The Vikings or Norsemen were active sea rovers from the Scandinavian region of Europe. The Vikings pillaged western Europe from the eighth to tenth centuries. Favorite targets of the Vikings were the wealthy monasteries along the French coast and throughout the British Isles. The Vikings also explored the rivers of eastern Europe and eventually made contact with Byzantium (Constantinople/Istanbul) which continued to serve as the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. Viking explorers of the Atlantic, most notably Lief Ericson, reached the cost of North America some four hundred years before Columbus.

The Muslim pirates operated from bases in North Africa. During the Crusades (1095-1295), Muslim pirates plundered the ships carrying the Crusaders and pilgrims and sold many Christians into slavery. For hundreds of years, the Muslim pirates collected "tribute" as protection against attack from the European powers. Usually, Christian Europe found it easiest just to pay the tribute, but in the early 1800's the newly independent United States fought an undeclared naval war against the "Barbary Pirates" under the slogan of "Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute!" and the phrase "to the shores of Tripoli" was added to the Marine's battle hymn.

When Columbus' discovery opened the western hemisphere for exploration and exploitation by the European powers, Spain naturally let the way, and Cortez's conquest of the Aztec's in Mexico and Pizzaro's conquest of the Inca's in Peru began the practice of "treasure fleets" which transported the vast wealth of the

new world back to Spain. Control of the sea lanes now became a matter of vital national interests.

At this time England was a relatively poor and weak country. Her king and queens were involved a centuries long struggle with parliament of control of the country's treasury. Parliament was reluctant to raise taxes for a powerful navy which would answer to the monarch rather than to Parliament.

But as an island nation, England had an extensive private fleet, and the monarchs found in it a solution to their dilemma. When at war with another country, the king or queen would issue "letters of marque" which commissioned these private commissioned ships became known as "privateers".

Privateers were "licensed" to confiscate the cargo of the enemy vessel and divide the profits among the crew. There has always been a fine line between a privateer by any government, and a pirate. Pirates commit robbery on the high seas. A pirate ship is not commissioned by any government, and pirates capture other ships in times of peace or war. Piracy constitutes a breach of the law. Privateers are privately owned and armed vessels commissioned by a government to attack enemy vessels in time of war. Because a state of war exists, privateering is not considered breaking the law. (For example, at the beginning of the American Revolution, because there was no US Navy, the colonies relied on privateers to carry on the naval war). However, because privateers often operated with invalid permits, or exceeded their authority, the line between their legitimate activities and piracy often became blurred.

By the latter half of the sixteenth century England was ready to challenge the naval supremacy of Spain. Spain's treasure fleets, which gathered every year in the Caribbean, became irresistible target for English privateers, and many an English Seaman became wealthy on captured Spanish gold. English "Sea Dogs" – John Hawkins, Francis Drake, Walter Raleigh – attacked Spanish shipping with Queen Elizabeth's approval – and despite the fact that England and Spain were technically at peace. The actions of these privateers/pirates was one of he reasons that Philip II of Spain launched his Invincible Armada against England in 1588. Ironically, the gold captured from the Sea Dogs' raids on the Spanish treasure fleets had helped

to finance the construction of the English fleet that would defeat the Armada, and Elizabeth's "Sea Dogs" would command that English fleet.

In the period following eh defeat of the Spanish Armada, England, France, and the Netherlands made use of adventurers called "buccaneers" who raided the Spanish Main pillaged anything Spanish. Eventually, Port Royal, on the Island of Jamaica became "pirate headquarters", and the West Indies with its many islands and sheltered harbors provided a perfect refuge for pirate ships.

Many pirate ships raided the sea lanes of the Caribbean in the winter and headed north to New England waters to plunder ships the summer months. As early as 1632, Massachusetts first governor, John Winthrop, sent a naval expedition after Dixie Bull – New England's first pirate.

Piracy in the Americas flourished in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and many of those pirates were New Englanders. Most New England pirates started out as privateers, hired by local merchants and commissioned by one of the colonies to attack the shipping of England's enemies. Since England was periodically at war with a variety of European countries the shipping of these countries became fair game for the New England privateers However, when the War of Spanish Succession ended in 1713 with a general European peace many newly unemployed privateers turned to piracy. This produced the greatest age of piracy with the pirate republic of New Providence at Nassau, Bahamas serving the center of pirate activity.

Although piracy was punishable by hanging, many seamen were willing to take the risk. Some who might have been outlaws in any event, took to piracy for the easy profits – it was easy to "get rich quick". Others were attracted by the freer existence and boisterous lifestyle which piracy seemed to offer. With few good paying jobs available during economic downturn, many seamen found piracy a better option than the harsh existence of the common worker ashore. Other factors which encouraged piracy can be found in the trade laws which forbade the colonies from trading with foreigners. This encouraged smuggling which further blurred the distinction between "legal" and "illegal" activities on the high seas. Finally, with an entire hemisphere newly discovered and an absence of international law, there could be few effective controls against piracy.