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***The Raft of the Medusa, Art Driving
Politics***

Lead: Theodore Gericault (Tay aw DAWR ZHAY ree KOH), *The Raft of the Medusa* (1818-1819), depicted a human tragedy of epic proportions. It was a political embarrassment to the post-Napoleonic French monarchy.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Gericault's painting, approximately 16 X 23 ft., hangs in the Louvre. It portrays the horrific experience of some of the survivors of the French frigate *Medusa*, which ran

aground off the West African coast of Senegal in July 1816. The painting depicts suffering survivors on a drifting raft at sea. *Medusa*, carrying 400 passengers, was the flagship of a small fleet commissioned take back possession of the port of Saint-Louis after a period of occupation by the British.

For this mission the French Ministry of the new Bourbon Restoration Government of France appointed an inexperienced captain whose main qualification seemed to be his loyalty to the monarchy. Nearing the end of the journey, the captain took bad advice and made a critical navigation error, and the ship ran aground on the Arguin (Argween)

Bank, a treacherous sand bar off the coast of Senegal.

Two hundred fifty people boarded the six lifeboats, and the remaining 150, mostly crew members and low ranking officers and soldiers, piled onto a large raft that had been jerry-rigged on board. The last was pulled along at the end of a convoy of lifeboats until it became too cumbersome and was cut loose. For twelve days the raft drifted aimlessly in the hot July sun. Hopelessness and despair on the raft turned to mayhem, mutiny, slaughter, suicide, starvation and cannibalism. When rescue came by the *Medusa's* sister ship only 15 out of the 150 had survived. Accounts of the survivors created a

governmental scandal which was inflamed by Gericault's dramatic painting of perhaps the most infamous shipwreck of the nineteenth century. Research assistance by Ann Johnson, at the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

McKee, Alexander. *Wreck of the Medusa: The Tragic Story of the Death Raft*. New York: Signet, 2000.

Miles, Alexander. *Wreck of the Medusa: The Most Famous Sea Disaster of the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007.

Ridding, Christine. "The Fatal Raft." *History Today* Feb. 2002: 38-44.

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