

1981-1986, Libya: "Tweaking Qaddafi's Nose"

By Stephen Shalom, political science, William Paterson University; author, *Imperial Alibis: Rationalizing U.S. Intervention after the Cold War* (1993).

From its first days in office, the Reagan administration was determined to provoke Qaddafi. In August 1981, the U.S. sent its fleet and air force into waters and airspace claimed by Libya. The U.S. said it was merely asserting its right to use international waters and that the resulting clash with Libyan planes was totally unintended and unexpected. These claims were phony.

In Reagan's first month in office an intelligence estimate concluded that the "Chances for an incident off Libya involving the U.S. are relatively high." Five days before the clash, Libya announced it would hold its own air and naval exercises in the Gulf. Thus the feigned surprise at Libya's response by Reagan administration officials was pure posturing for public consumption.

So were the assurances that U.S. military maneuvers were non-provocative. "I couldn't consider it a provocation," asserted Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, "because they are international waters." However, the Gulf Cooperation Council – a group of pro-Western oil-producing states – condemned U.S. behavior as a "provocative trap," "medieval piracy on the high seas" and "cowboy politics." Tunisian and Saudi newspapers accused the U.S. of acting like a bully. Privately, U.S. officials admitted: "We went ahead because the principle of the open seas is important," said one high policymaker, "and because we wanted to tweak Qaddafi's nose."

U.S. naval maneuvers, noted the director of Yale's Center for International and Area Studies, "featured air attack runs toward Libyan targets with the airplanes veering off just short of national airspace." The U.S. claimed that such maneuvers were permissible under international law. However, at least twelve nations claim Air Defense Identification Zones extending many miles over the ocean, within which the actions of foreign aircraft may be restricted. The first nation to proclaim

such a zone and the one with the most extensive claim is the U.S. Since 1973, Libya has declared a 100-mile restricted zone around Tripoli. Attack runs to the 12-mile limit are unambiguously provocative – and the UN Charter prohibits not just the use of force, but the threat of force as well.

In 1984, the CIA reported that disaffected elements in Libya's military "could be spurred to assassination attempts." France planned an operation to assassinate or overthrow Qaddafi, and Washington approved sharing intelligence information with Paris.

The next year, the U.S. authorized "Operation Flower," to oust Qaddafi. One of its components, "Tu-

the one in the Suez crisis of 1956." The Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram*, reported on three U.S. efforts to get Egypt to attack Libya, all rejected by Cairo. The U.S. Ambassador to Egypt told Washington, however, that Egyptian leader Mubarak secretly vowed to continue the anti-Libyan military planning with Washington.

When Berlin's La Belle disco was bombed on April 4, 1986, it was hardly the case that the reluctant warriors in the White House had to be coerced into action. [Although instantly blamed on Libya, it was later found that CIA and Israeli Mossad agents were involved in the bombing. See *Press for Conversion!*, issue #50.] Only



The U.S. aerial bombardment of residential districts in Tripoli and Benghazi on April 15, 1986, killed 31 civilians and wounded 226. Qaddafi's two-year old, adopted daughter, Hana, was killed.

lip," involved U.S. support for Libyan exiles. Another component, "Rose," was to be a preemptive military strike with U.S. allies, particularly Egypt, targeting Qaddafi's barracks. A speech announcing the strike was written for the chief flower-child, Ronald Reagan.

U.S. officials made a secret trip to Egypt in mid-1985 to coordinate military operations against Qaddafi. In January 1986, Reagan approved expanded covert efforts to subvert Qaddafi and authorized another high ranking U.S. official to continue military planning in Cairo. By March, various stories reached the press regarding U.S. military plans against Libya. One plan "involved an Egyptian ground attack followed by a request for U.S. assistance," a pattern "similar to

three members of Congress publicly challenged the subsequent U.S. air raids on Libya.

"Provocative Trap" to Create a Pretext for War

In 1985-1986, the National Security Council conducted secret polls to ascertain under what conditions Americans would back an armed confrontation. To build support for a military strike, Qaddafi would have to be provoked into taking some action. A Special National Intelligence Estimate on Libya in 1985 concluded that "Qaddafi would directly target U.S. personnel or installations" if he believed he could get away with it and/or if he "believed the U.S. was engaging in a direct threat to his person or was actively trying to

overthrow his regime.”

In 1985, the House and Senate intelligence committees approved a CIA plan, authorized by Reagan, which the *Washington Post* said was designed to “lure” Qaddafi “into some foreign adventure or terrorist exploit that would give a growing number of Qaddafi opponents in the Libyan military a chance to seize power, or... give one of Qaddafi’s neighbors, such as Algeria or Egypt, a justification for responding to Qaddafi militarily.”

In January 1986, Reagan broke all economic relations with Libya. At a White

House meeting, according to one participant, a decision was explicitly reached to provoke Qaddafi by again using naval vessels and aircraft. Any Libyan response would be used to justify military action. For four days, U.S. war planes flew in the region covered by Libyan radar. In February, two carrier battle groups and their planes conducted exercises there.

In March, joined by a third carrier, the U.S. forces moved across the Qaddafi’s so-called “Line of Death.” The White House told U.S. forces to “be disproportionate” in responding to any Libyan action. *Newsweek* and *Time* quoted White House aides confiding that “we wanted to provoke Qaddafi into responding so we could stick it to him, and we knew he would oblige us,” that “of course we’re aching for a go at Qaddafi,” and that if Qaddafi “sticks his head up, we’ll clobber him; we’re looking for an excuse.”

According to U.S. sources, U.S. air sorties “probed” up to the 12-mile limit of Libyan territorial waters. A British radar engineer working for the Libyans said: “I watched the planes fly approximately eight miles into Libyan airspace.... I don’t think the Libyans had any choice but to hit back.”

The Libyans didn’t quite hit back: they fired a couple of missiles that landed so far from any U.S. targets that the Pentagon is not sure what they were aiming at. But this was enough for the U.S. to attack Libyan missile sites, sink a patrol boat and declare that any Libyan military vessel or plane departing Libyan territo-

rial waters or airspace would be regarded as hostile. An additional Libyan patrol boat was sunk “as she entered international waters” and another was severely damaged. Seventy-two Libyan sailors drowned in the confrontation.

The U.S. Senate and House were virtually unanimous in cheering Reagan, not even minding that the administration had briefed the Kremlin

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- “[If Qaddafi] sticks his head up, we’ll clobber him; we’re looking for an excuse.”

but not the Congress. (Poindexter claimed it “slipped his mind.”) World opinion was less sanguine. The delegate from the pro-Western United Arab Emirates declared during the Security Council debate: “The American maneuvers...were designed to provoke, the attack against Libya was premeditated, the entire action was unlawful, illegal and unjustifiable, and the use of force was totally out of proportion to the situation. The problem was one of arbitrary use of force by a major Power against a small State.”

The administration made no secret of its hopes: “The question now is what will Qaddafi do to save his manhood.” Three weeks later the *Washington Post* quoted a source stating that intelligence reports now showed that terrorism was Tripoli’s “clear policy” in place of its previous passive support or occasional expressions of sympathy with radical Arabs. (In addition to revealing the effects of U.S. incitement, these comments are a striking admission that, contrary to U.S. claims, terrorism had *not* been Qaddafi’s “clear policy” in the past.)

In August 1986, remarking on the Libyan leader’s penchant for ostentatious clothing, Reagan chuckled “Why not invite Qaddafi to San Francisco, he likes to dress up so much.” Secretary of State George Shultz chimed in, “Why don’t we give him AIDS?” Everyone laughed.

The plan that these jokers came up with was a program of disinformation that, U.S. officials acknowledged, might provoke new terrorist

acts. False reports of impending Libyan terror were fed to the press with stories of imminent U.S. military moves. The State Department proposed electronic signals deception to make it appear that U.S. planes were flying over the “line of death.” And, U.S.-Egyptian military exercises were conducted in “a particularly provocative manner,” according to *Washington Post* sources. Whether any of the terrorist acts in the next months were fruits of this program is uncertain.

With the likely passing of the Soviet threat, other excuses for U.S. interventionism have to be found. Qaddafi is one of the foreign devils being groomed to rationalize U.S. intervention in the new, post-Cold War world. The real devils, however, and the real sources of Washington’s interventionism are to be found in the structures of U.S. society.

Source: Excerpt from “The U.S. and Libya: Part 2: The Qaddafi Era,” *Z Magazine*, June 1990. <www.zmag.org/zmag/articles/Shalomlyb2.html>

Qaddafi’s Real Sins

By Michael Parenti, author of *Democracy for the Few* (2002).

Why was Libya singled out as a major threat to U.S. national security? Why is Libya targeted with oil and trade embargoes? U.S. attacks have likely been motivated by U.S. concern that Libya is one of those renegade countries that refuses client-state status. There are countries that do not want to be integrated into the global free market system. They do not want to open their land, labor, markets and natural resources to U.S. investors.

After Qaddafi took power in the 1969 colonel’s rebellion, he nationalized Libya’s oil industry and set about transforming a country that resembled Saudi Arabia into a more egalitarian society, using a larger portion of its capital and labor for public needs rather than corporate greed, building health clinics, schools, and public housing, and implementing massive reforestation programs.

Source: Excerpt, *Dirty Truths* (1996).

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