

Rambo Reagan's blunder

The Americans," a European diplomat once told me, "only know how to use force, not power." Ronald Reagan's dive bomber diplomacy in Libya on Monday illustrates the point.

Once again, an Arab city has been shattered by American bombs, once more survivors are calling for revenge against the U.S. Tripoli looked disturbingly like Beirut.

Last fall Israel tried to assassinate PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat by a surprise bombing attack on his Tunis headquarters, but failed, killing 100 people in the process. On Monday a copycat U.S. tried to kill Khadafy, but also failed, and only managed to slaughter 17 civilians in Tripoli, kill Khadafy's adopted daughter and gravely wound two of his sons. Hardly a proud day for American arms.

Americans, blind to the Mideast disaster into which they were stumbling, were swept with fevered jingoism unseen since the days of the Spanish-American War. Critical judgment was replaced by war fever and Rambomania. This is precisely how major wars begin, by paroxysms of moral posturing that paralyze reason.

No matter that America had finally gone to war with an Arab nation, no matter that its target may not have been the right one, Khadafy, "terrorism's paymaster" had to be bombed.

This simplistic logic may have thrilled Americans conditioned to TV-think, but it outraged Europeans (more on this in Sunday's column) and reinforced the Arab view that America is truly their enemy. Arabs, who have been blasted by American-supplied Israeli bombs for the past 40 years, just can't get too excited about U.S. howls over "state-sponsored terrorism."

It is tragic to watch the Reagan administration, with an unbroken record of failure in the Mideast, committing a historic blunder by going to war against Libya. Reagan and his top adviser, the muddled George Shultz, seem to have swallowed the proposition that terrorism is an evil independent of any other events in the Mideast. The reality, that terrorism is a symptom of the profound sickness of the Mideast — much of the problem American-created — is ignored.

Far easier and more popular to bomb Khadafy, a bit player in the wings who sometimes funds terrorist groups, than to face the real problems: The Palestinians, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza, Syria, Iran, the Gulf War. More tragedy: America, creator of a majority of the Mideast's problems, is the only nation that can solve them; instead, it bombs Libya.

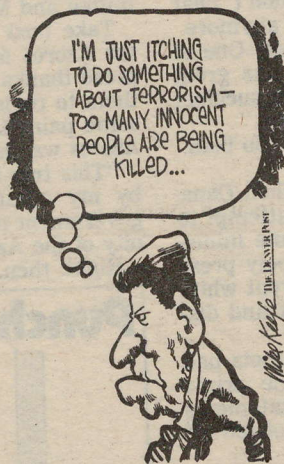
Blasting Libya and killing Khadafy's child will not stop terrorism. Terrorists come from the madhouse of Lebanon, from the 2.5 million homeless Palestinians. Israel has been bombing, shelling and assassinating Palestinian "terrorists" for 40 years. Yet the attacks, the violence, keep occurring — at a quickening pace. Each bombing creates more victims and more vengeful terrorists.

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Terrorism will worsen until America finally faces reality in the Mideast and somehow finds the political courage to promote peace. Bombing did not crush the Palestinians; it did not crush the Vietnamese. The Israelis invaded Lebanon in the name of halting "terrorism," and yet the terror continues. All of the dishonest, shameful bombast over Libya now issuing from Washington and the media will not change this reality.

The administration has no policy in the Mideast, no ideas, no courage, only recourse to blind, stupid violence. This is not the role or duty of a great power. One cannot deal with the complexities of the Mideast by creating a TV miniseries called "Righteous Ronnie vs. Mad Dog Moammar." But,



of course, Reagan has, and so has America. Any Arabs or Iranians who now dare oppose U.S. policy will remember what happened to Khadafy.

Who will be the next target of American bombs? Will America kill all Palestinians, Lebanese and Iranians? Somehow, I suspect Reagan will not wish to tangle with Syria or Iran. Easier to pick on the unlikely, loudmouth Khadafy. Another easy victory like Grenada for a swaggering U.S. But who will really gain from this orgasm of violence?

Why, the new terrorists across the Mideast who will spring up to fight the U.S. And Khadafy, if he survives a reported coup now under way, the Soviets and all the anti-U.S. radicals in the region who can point to the bombing of Libya as a fine example of U.S. imperialism. In North America, people may be euphoric; abroad, the view is sharply different. America, to ease a headache, has shot itself in the foot.