

The Libyan Bogeyman

By Eric Margolis

TORONTO — The Reagan Administration's strange obsession with Libya is diverting some of its attention from the real problems of the Middle East and creating a potentially explosive situation in North Africa.

Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, Washington's *bête noir*, may indeed be a regional troublemaker and a bitter enemy of American influence in the Middle East, but America's response to the latest Libyan "crisis" was so out of proportion to any real threat that the credulity of Administration intelligence and security officials must be questioned.

Libya, with an ill-trained, ragtag army of 55,000, poses no military threat to the Sudan or to Egypt, its neighbor, whose 350,000-man army could overrun Libya in a few days. The last time Libyan forces were in real combat, during an unsuccessful attempt to support Idi Amin in Uganda in 1979, Colonel Qaddafi's 2,000-man force was easily routed by the invading Tanzanian Army, itself hardly awesome.

Administration officials' contradictory statements strongly suggested that the dispatch of a carrier battle group and four Awacs planes to North Africa may have been a crude attempt to provoke Libya into attacking American forces, thus justifying an Egyptian invasion.

The last time America tried to pick a fight with Libya, in August 1981, was in response to the farcical episode of invisible Libyan "hit teams." They were never found, and probably never existed, but that did nothing to make Washington question its sources of information. It may be that those sources, both in the latest "crisis" and the earlier one, were Israeli, Egyptian and Sudanese intelligence, all of whom are bent on destroying Colonel Qaddafi and each of which has self-serving reasons for wanting to involve America in warfare with Libya. Both Egypt and the Sudan, completely dependent on American aid, have found, to their pleasure, that the fastest way to get more assistance is to raise the specter of the Libyan bogeyman, particularly now that the Russians are hardly a threat in the Middle East. Anwar el-Sadat, stung by Colonel Qaddafi's charges that he was corrupt and venal, attempted to convince Jimmy Carter to permit

an Egyptian invasion of Libya.

Today, Hosni Mubarak and the Sudan's leader, Gen. Gaafar al-Nimeiri, both in deep political trouble because of their crumbling economies, find Colonel Qaddafi, an ardent critic of their regimes, a continuing nuisance and a tempting diversion from their own problems.

The old game of Egypt's and the Sudan's crying wolf keeps working. In February, vague reports of a coup plot against the Nimeiri regime were enough to cause Washington to send aircraft and warships to the region.

America has frequently perceived one person as the source of Middle Eastern problems. When Gamal Abdel Nasser was President of Egypt, American officials ascribed all the troubles caused by Arab nationalism to him. "If we could only get rid of Nasser, our problems would be solved," the line went. But his death, in 1970, resolved none of America's dilemmas in the Arab world. Elimination of Colonel Qaddafi certainly will not resolve the issues of Palestine, Egypt's foundering economy, the Iran-Iraq war and Lebanon.

The opera bouffe sideshow in Libya managed briefly to deflect some energy from Administration efforts to negotiate a general Arab-Israeli settlement at a time when Israel and its Arab enemies are most vulnerable to American pressure. It is not impossible that foes of such a settlement, in the Administration and the Middle East, are actively promoting a crisis with Libya in order to maintain the status quo. Washington's refusal to respond to recent Qaddafi attempts to improve relations may give some credence to this supposition.

The spectacle of Washington's reacting to tiny Libya, a nation of 3.2 million, like a horrified and very large woman who sees a very small mouse, would be comical if there were not so much potential danger in this saber-rattling. Libya is neither an ally nor a cat's paw of the Soviet Union. But if the Americans and their Egyptian satraps continue to threaten an attack on Libya, surely Colonel Qaddafi would turn to Moscow for large-scale military support. If this happened, the danger of a clash between Soviet air and naval units and the United States' Mediterranean forces, joined by Egypt, would become very real. What is essentially a petty intra-Arab squabble could quickly become a major confrontation no one wanted.

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