

Tripped in a tangled web

Ha, ha, ha," laughed my Libyan source, tickled pink by the Reagan Administration's latest Mideast fiasco. No wonder the Libyans are delighted. The pistol-packing Americans had once again managed to shoot themselves in the foot. Score 0 for Washington; 10 for not-so-mad Moammar Khadafy.

This latest embarrassment was caused by revelations last week that the administration had been leaking false stories and downright lies about Libya to the American media. These included bogus charges that Khadafy was planning to unleash a "new wave of terror" and stories that the U.S. Sixth Fleet was about to punish the naughty Libyans. Among those gulled by the disinformation campaign was the mighty, and now very angry, *Wall Street Journal*.

The *Journal* featured the false stories and urged nefarious Libya be given another bashing.

News that the administration was lying about Libya was broken by the *Washington Post*, which apparently received leaked memos from the White House.

Readers of this column had advance notice. Last June, in a piece called "The department of lies," I wrote of plans to use disinformation as a tool of government policy and cautioned that its employment in a democracy was perilous. Too bad the *Sun* does not have a Washington edition.

The State Department's spokesman, Marvin Kalb, resigned, deeply angered that he had been unknowingly used as a conduit for false information. He deserves our admiration. The two bunglers responsible for this Mutt and Jeff episode, national security adviser John Poindexter and Secretary of State George Shultz, should have been fired by the president.

Once again the U.S. has been made to look a fool by tiny Libya. There is something about this scruffy North African piece of desert that produces a kind of dementia in American officials. Hysteria over Libya is so profound that it seems to anesthetize the common sense. It's bad enough having yellow journalists foaming about "Mad Dog Moammar;" watching Libya make monkeys of the highest American officials is truly disturbing.

After being caught crying wolf over Libya, who will again believe Washington's claims that little Libya is a threat even greater than the Soviet Union? Europeans, who never much subscribed to Washington's crusade against Khadafy, will now become even more sceptical.

It's also worth noting that the American bombing of Libya has had the dangerous, delayed effect predicted in this column months ago.

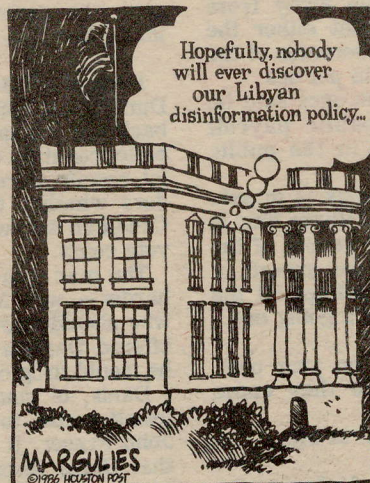
The British Labor party — now running ahead in the polls — has made a campaign pledge to oust American nuclear bases from the U.K. Powerful forces within Labor are also pushing for the

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removal of all U.S. air bases as a direct result of their use to launch attacks on Libya. By pressuring Margaret Thatcher into joining the attack on Libya, Washington stirred up a hornet's nest in the U.K. that could have disastrous consequences for NATO. U.S. air bases in Britain are NATO's single most vital component.

"Disinformationgate" adds one more chapter to the Reagan administration's thick volume of mideastern failures and disasters. No wonder. Under George Shultz, seasoned officials who understood the Mideast's complexities were branded "pro-Arab" and dumped. They were replaced by officials who steered American policy in a manner favorable to Israeli interests — which do not



always coincide with those of the U.S. — and a group of California political operatives whose knowledge of foreign places seems limited to *Love Boat*.

So what you have are senior officials like Shultz and Poindexter, men with narrow minds and a profound ignorance of world affairs, advised by junior officials with a very sharp axe to grind and by political advisers with their eyes fixed on the next elections.

That's why Khadafy continues to make a fool of the U.S. He has only to stick out his foot in the path of the stumbling U.S. and watch the American giant once again fall on its face.

You would think that six years of such failure and arrant incompetence would be enough, even for genial Ronald Reagan. But no, he keeps on the very men who have made U.S. Mideast policy a synonym for ineptitude and self-delusion. Maybe "mad" Moammar could lend some of his advisers to Reagan.