



On 'Prankster From Tripoli'

I read Antony T. Sullivan's "Prankster From Tripoli" in the May 1988 issue with dismay.

In April 1986 the United States retaliated against the Libyan regime for a long string of aggressive actions by Muammar el-Qaddafi against Americans and U.S. interests. This use of force had remarkable efficacy, for Qaddafi's bellicosity against the United States has since then come to a virtual end. For over two years, the fanatic of Tripoli has been nearly dormant, and there is good reason to expect him to stay quiet for some time to come.

In light of this record, it is strange to read Mr. Sullivan's condemnation of the American raid and his preference for "silent contempt." It is even more peculiar to learn from Mr. Sullivan that the raid was harmful because it hurt opposition elements within the Libyan military—an exact counterpart to the argument purveyed by Soviet apologists

that any effort of American assertion harms the standing of doves in the Kremlin.

—Daniel Pipes
Philadelphia, PA

Antony Sullivan Replies

Mr. Pipes repeats the tired mythology about the United States bombardment of Libya being occasioned by a "long string" of aggressive actions mounted by Qaddafi against Americans and U.S. interests. In fact, Qaddafi's terrorism was the *excuse*, not the reason, for the American bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi. The number of attacks launched by Libya against American targets was minor compared to the number directed against American interests by the far more professional terrorists in Syria and Iran.

The principal reasons why the United States chose to strike at Libya rather than at either Syria or Iran were Libya's military vulnerability, its marginal role in Middle East politics, and its lack of a committed great-power patron. The attack on Libya was also launched to appease the domestic hysteria over terrorism which the Reagan administration had done much to fan and from which it benefited politically.

U.S. State Department data showed that Libya carried out a maximum of only three terrorist attacks against American targets during the entire period from 1980 through 1985, as compared to a total of 46 against Arab and African targets. Israeli analysts report that out of 408 terrorist incidents recorded during 1985, Libyan hit teams were responsible for only 11, eight of which were directed at Libyan dissidents. A U.S. State Department report shows that during 1985 Syria and Iran each mounted some 30 ter-

rorist attacks (mostly through surrogates), with the United States as the primary target. In 1985 Islamic Jihad, which is closely affiliated with Iran, kidnaped four Americans in Lebanon. It is surely difficult to argue that by early 1986 Libya had perpetrated an inordinate number of attacks against American targets or constituted such a threat to U.S. national security that military action was imperative.

Contrary to what Mr. Pipes asserts, Qaddafi has hardly been "nearly dormant" during the last two years. Never a major threat to the United States, he does continue to control a terrorist network which U.S. officials fear has the potential to cause significant instability in several African countries. In May 1988 L. Paul Bremer III, the U.S. State Department's ranking authority on terrorism, described Qaddafi as "active" and an instigator of terrorist actions worldwide through the Japanese Red Army organization and the psychotic Palestinian renegade Abu Nidal who now has his operational headquarters in Tripoli. During April 1988 alone, U.S. officials detected Qaddafi's fingerprints on five terrorist operations in three Latin American nations and one European country.

The fact is that the American raid did shore up Qaddafi's position as dictator and has discouraged action against him by his opponents in the Libyan military.

In 1985 and early 1986, Qaddafi was in trouble. The Libyan army was increasingly opposed to his curtailment of its power in favor of the "armed masses" led by the Revolutionary Committee which Qaddafi had created. In the spring of 1985, Libyan officers made two attempts to assassinate Qaddafi. A third attempt was made in August 1985. In November 1985, a nervous Qaddafi evidently arranged for the assassination of Colonel Hassan Ishkal, the commander of

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the Sirte military region and an outspoken opponent of Qaddafi's downgrading of the Libyan army. By then, Qaddafi had little affection for the USSR and may even have feared that the Kremlin might act to remove him from power. This growing opposition in the Libyan army, and Qaddafi's disillusionment with the Soviet Union, were dealt major setbacks by the American attack on Libya.

By spectacularly demonstrating the incompetence of the Libyan army, the U.S. raid reduced the prestige of the very entity most disaffected with Qaddafi. Given the military's failure at a moment of crisis, Libyan officers could hardly argue any longer that they could provide more effective leadership for the country than Qaddafi. Indeed, there have been no known coup attempts by the army during the last two years. The military's humiliation has only benefited the fanatical Qaddafi supporters in the Revolutionary Committees. The U.S. raid also seems to have stilled Qaddafi's fears concerning the Soviet Union. Now, Qaddafi asserts that the defense of Libya is "vital" to Soviet interests and that Libya and the USSR are involved in a "common struggle."