

Lost Lessons of Libya

Exclusive: Despite months of Western diplomatic efforts, Libya remains an object lesson in “regime change” arrogance, a failed state beset by rival militias and becoming a new base for Islamic extremists as the movie “Thirteen Hours” graphically depicts, writes James DiEugenio.

By James DiEugenio

American foreign policy leaders are not great at learning lessons from the past. The cautionary tale about “regime change” from George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq in 2003 did not even last until 2011 when President Barack Obama at the urging of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton plunged into “regime change” in Libya, creating one more failed state and another humanitarian catastrophe.

Different presidents, different parties, very similar results.

In the case of Libya, many of the failings from that enterprise are recounted in the book, *Thirteen Hours*, along with one of the tragic consequences of that adventure, the death of U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans in Benghazi on Sept. 11, 2012, an event highlighted in a movie by the same name.

But the failure of Obama and Clinton to heed the warnings from the Iraq disaster has historical precedents in other prescient warnings that were ignored by impetuous leaders, such as early doubts expressed about the gathering storm clouds in Vietnam in the 1950s.

In 1958, William Lederer, a former Navy officer, and Eugene Burdick, a political scientist, submitted their draft of a non-fiction book called *The Ugly American* to W.W. Norton Company. An editor at Norton suggested it would probably be more dramatically effective if it was rewritten as a roman a clef, that is as a thinly disguised fiction based on actual people and events.

From a marketing standpoint at least, the editor was correct. *The Ugly American* became a sensational success, spending 76 weeks on the best-seller lists and eventually selling over four million copies. [*New York Times*, Nov. 29, 2009]

Arrogance and Stupidity

Essentially, the authors were criticizing the arrogance and stupidity of American foreign policy in Indochina. They were particularly hard on the State Department. They pictured its employees as being insensitive and unknowledgeable about the true circumstances and conditions of the cultures they were dealing

with. Even the best of their representatives were blinded by the distortions of the Cold War. Their consuming anti-communism kept them from perceiving that they had become their own worst enemies.

Sen. John F. Kennedy, a skeptic about U.S. interventions in Third World conflicts, mailed a copy of *The Ugly American* to each member of the U.S. Senate, but the United States plunged nonetheless into the Vietnam killing fields, with Kennedy as president deploying the Green Berets and other military advisers to the South Vietnamese army and then after Kennedy's death President Lyndon Johnson escalating the war dramatically by committing more than a half million U.S. soldiers.

But even the devastating failure in Vietnam did not instill any lasting sense of caution and humility in the U.S. foreign policy establishment. Bristling with boasts about "American exceptionalism," President George W. Bush rushed off to invade Iraq in 2003 and President Barack Obama launched an air war in Libya in 2011 in support of an uprising against longtime strongman Muammar Gaddafi.

Like his predecessors in other U.S. interventions, Obama was either ignorant of or chose to ignore history, since Libya had a long record of suffering under and resisting foreign powers.

For three centuries, the Ottoman Empire had controlled Libya until 1890. In 1912, Italy took over the northern African country, but was cast out eight years later. However, in 1931, Italian fascist Benito Mussolini invaded again. His forces captured and hanged the Moslem leader Omar Mukhtar, who became a martyred hero, especially in eastern Libya.

It was not until after World War II, with Italy and its fascist Axis allies defeated, that Libya became free and independent. In 1951, a constitutional monarchy under the Senussi Moslem leader Idris al-Senussi was formed. At that time, Libya was one of the poorest and most illiterate countries in the world. [*Thirteen Hours*, by Mitchell Zuckoff, e-book version, p. 11]

In 1969, the king was overthrown in a bloodless military coup led by Colonel Muammar Gaddafi who then exercised what was essentially one-man rule over Libya for over 40 years during which Libya grew rich from oil fields mostly located in the east around Benghazi, although political power was concentrated in the west around Tripoli, which Gaddafi made the permanent capital and the home for the National Oil Corporation. Most of the improvements Gaddafi made, such as hospitals and schools, were also in the west. [ibid, p. 11]

Backing a Rebellion

So, in 2011, when a rebellion broke out against Gaddafi, it understandably

started in east Libya and was partly fueled by the slighting of the east for the west. Once this happened, in the context of other uprisings known as the Arab Spring, President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton assisted by then U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice and National Security staffer Samantha Power decided to seize the opportunity to eliminate Gaddafi, long considered a thorn in the side of U.S. foreign policy.

But as with Bush in Iraq they did not appear to have asked themselves: 1.) What do we have to replace him? and 2.) Will the situation in Libya be better or worse when he is gone? Some observers cautioned about any American intervention, simply because of the Pandora's Box effect: Who could possibly predict what would happen afterwards?

The rebellion against Gaddafi began in February 2011 in east Libya, and then spread westward. It included the Islamist organizations, the Libyan Fighting Group and the Obaida Ibn Jarrah Brigade. These organizations appear to have fought Gaddafi because he allowed a secular form of government, including many rights for women.

The anti-Gaddafi opposition also included elements of Al Qaeda, though the rebel groups denied this at the time. The role of Islamic extremists was confirmed by a West Point study of captured Al Qaeda documents called the Sinjar Records, which showed that a disproportionate number of jihadists who flocked to fight American troops in Iraq came from eastern Libya. Also, according to documents released by Wikileaks, one of the rebel leaders had joined the Taliban. [*The Daily Telegraph*, Oct. 29, 2011]

So, although there were pro-democratic elements in the rebellion against Gaddafi, mainly among the professional classes, there was a real danger that, if the rebels won out, the result could be a hardline Islamist state that would revoke rights for women and create a new stronghold for terrorism.

Secretary Clinton also was made aware of the role of regional rivalries seeking Gaddafi's demise as well as Western motives that had nothing to do with protecting the lives or improving the lot of Libyans. For instance, among Clinton's recently declassified emails, private adviser Sidney Blumenthal informed her that Egyptian special operations units were training and arming Libyan militants along the Egypt/Libya border and in Benghazi even before the uprising began. [Brad Hoff, *The Levant Report*, Jan. 4, 2016]

France's Motives

France also parachuted weapons to the rebels, including anti-tank rockets. [*Le Figaro*, June 28, 2011] And, as Blumenthal explained to Clinton, France's motives

were not entirely noble. French President Nicolas Sarkozy wanted a greater share of Libyan oil production than he was getting from Gaddafi. Also, Sarkozy was interested in a new government in Libya because Gaddafi had plans to supplant the French franc with the Libyan golden dinar in Francophone Africa. In other words, Gaddafi wanted to free Africa from the neocolonial interests of the old colonial powers.

Blumenthal warned Clinton, too, that elements of Al Qaeda were infiltrating upward into the rebel umbrella group called the NTC, the National Transitional Council. [See Consortiumnews.com's "[What Hillary Knew about Libya.](#)"]

Retired UK Prime Minister Tony Blair was alerted to the terrorist role directly by Gaddafi. While in power, Blair had visited Gaddafi a number of times and the Libyan leader considered him a friend.

In two phone calls on Feb. 25, 2011, Gaddafi told Blair that the forces he was fighting were similar to Osama Bin Laden. He said, "We are not fighting them, they are attacking us. An organization had laid down sleeping cells in North Africa. Called the Al Qaeda Organization in North Africa. The sleeping cells in Libya are similar to dormant cells in America before 9/11." [*The Telegraph*, Jan. 7, 2016] As the author of this story, Robert Mendick noted Gaddafi was prophetic about this considering the later attacks in France.

But the Western leaders ignored these warnings. Following the Lederer-Burdick script from Indochina, France and the U.S., for different reasons, decided to team up again to attack a Third World country, this time in Africa.

While there were covert operations already going on in Libya, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were working more or less out in the open at the United Nations.

Tricking the Russians

In February 2011, the U.S., France, Germany and England teamed up to pass Security Council Resolution 1970. This act condemned Gaddafi for using lethal force against civilians in Tripoli (which, as many commentators have written, probably did not happen.) The UN then passed a series of sanctions against Libya, including freezing some assets and enacting an arms embargo. At the same time Western countries were aiding some of the worst elements of the rebellion.

One month later, the Obama administration returned to the United Nations, wanting to go even further. Resolution 1973 proposed the establishment of "a no-fly zone" over Libya, supposedly for humanitarian purposes. It also contained a clause that allowed all necessary means to protect civilians, short of an occupying force. Russia and China were lobbied not to veto it but rather to

abstain from the vote, which they did despite concerns that the use of military force could result in unintended consequences.

The pretense for this intervention was that Gaddafi's forces, which had isolated the rebels near Benghazi, would inflict a bloodbath. So, soon after the "humanitarian" resolution passed, the Western military operation unleashed fierce attacks against Gaddafi's army in the east and quickly expanded the intervention into a "regime change" project headed by NATO, bombing a wide range of Libyan government targets and blockading ports.

Codenamed "Operation Unified Protector," over 9,000 strike sorties were flown and over 400 artillery batteries were destroyed along with 600 tanks or armored vehicles. [*Final Mission Stats*, published by NATO, Nov. 2, 2011]

Some critics argued at the time that the Obama administration was exaggerating the potential for a bloodbath. For instance, University of Texas professor Alan Kuperman pointed out that neither Amnesty International nor Human Rights Watch warned of any impending massacre in Libya and neither did the U.S. intelligence community.

In March 2011, Kuperman wrote that there was no photographic evidence to support the administration's claims but rather mostly rebel propaganda transmitted to the White House, which uncritically accepted it. [*Foreign Affairs*, "Who Lost Libya", April 21, 2015] Kuperman said the intervention was actually driven by the fact that Gaddafi was close to stifling the rebellion. ["Obama's Libya Debacle," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2015]

The true aim of the UN/NATO enterprise was not humanitarian relief but "regime change." Once the rebel forces sensed that, they decided to reject each and every offer of a truce with negotiations that the Libyan government extended.

Call for 'Regime Change'

Obama signaled U.S. support for the rebel intransigence by announcing on March 3, 2011, that Gaddafi "must step down from power and leave." (op. cit. "Who Lost Libya") The State Department then ordered U.S. Africa Command to stop peace negotiations on March 22. Even though Gaddafi made two more offers for a truce, with minimal demands on his side requesting only that his inner circle be allowed to leave the country peacefully and that Libya retain a military force strong enough to fight Al Qaeda and ISIS elements of the rebellion. (ibid)

Former Rear Admiral Charles Kubic, who had a major role in the negotiations, confirmed that Gaddafi was willing to step down and that his military leaders were willing to withdraw their forces from the cities to the outskirts in order to begin a truce process. Kubic was puzzled by the refusal of Western officials

to accept, not only this but also the offer to discuss constitutional changes and pay compensation to victims of the fighting.

Kubic came to the conclusion that, "It wasn't enough to get him out of power; they wanted him dead." (ibid) Gaddafi's olive branches were rebuffed, dismissed out of hand.

If Gaddafi's death was indeed the goal a kind of head-on-a-spike, tough-guy/gal moment of blood lust the goal was achieved. Due to the massive NATO bombing and repeated refusals of a negotiated settlement, Tripoli was taken in the autumn of 2011. Gaddafi retreated to his hometown of Sirte, where he was captured on Oct. 20, 2011, tortured (sodomized with a knife) and then murdered.

Secretary Clinton could hardly contain her glee. Basking in her "Mission Accomplished" moment, she famously declared to a broadcast reporter, "We came, we saw, he died."

But as George W. Bush had shown, when proper geopolitical conditions are not considered, a seeming victory can become a disaster. It turned out Gaddafi was correct. There were strong elements of radical Islam incorporated into the rebellion against him. And although an interim government was constructed, it could not control the anarchy that had been unleashed by the civil war. The government simply could not coax or order the guerrillas, militias and Islamists to disarm.

Benghazi Chaos

There was so little order that huge arms bazaars materialized overnight and sold sophisticated weapons on the street. Even before the outbreak of violence against Americans at the State Department compound and the CIA annex in Benghazi, there were two major violent clashes in 2012: the Sabha tribal dispute, resulting in 147 dead and 395 wounded, and the Zuwara conflict between Gaddafi loyalists and local militias, with estimates of more than 50 dead and over 100 wounded.

In the face of this escalating violence and the inability of the new government to quell the disorder, several foreign embassies shuttered their windows and closed their doors. However, the United States did not withdraw, even from the anarchic situation surrounding Benghazi.

In Benghazi, the United States had allied itself with a less radical group called the February 17th Martyrs Brigade which supplied hired guards to protect State Department buildings. [Zuckoff, p. 19] But perhaps the most powerful militia in Libya at the time of the Benghazi attack was the Ansar al Sharia Brigade, which translates as Partisans of Islamic Law.

The violence escalated because of the easy availability of weapons, including grenades, mortars, rocket launchers and heavy machine guns. [ibid, p. 20] In June 2012, a rocket-propelled grenade was fired at the British ambassador, contributing to the United Kingdom's decision to depart Benghazi. (ibid, p. 22)

In June 2012, Ambassador Christopher Stevens sent a cable to Washington, warning that Al Qaeda influence was spreading in Libya and he had seen their flags flying. Around the same time, Stevens had sent another cable to Washington seeking more bodyguards. He described the security conditions in Libya as being "unpredictable, volatile and violent." [ibid, p. 63]

This request was denied, as were similar ones. Altogether, Stevens' requests for added security were denied three times, even though the State Department classified the conditions for staffers there as critical. In late August 2012, the department circulated a travel warning to Libya declaring that "Political violence in the form of assassination and vehicle bombs have increased in both Benghazi and Tripoli. Inter-military conflict can erupt at any time or any place in the country." [ibid, p. 65]

So the questions become: 1.) If the U.S. was going to stay, why was State not willing to fully protect its own personnel? and 2.) If not willing to fully protect the personnel, why should they stay? Whatever the answer to those questions, one of the main functions of the State Department compound in Benghazi, which did not technically qualify as a consulate, was to gather intelligence on the growing influence of Al Qaeda. (ibid, pgs. 35, 61)

Whenever one of the State Department employees went out to meet with a citizen, whoever it may have been, they were escorted by at least one bodyguard. That guard was either employed by Diplomatic Security (DS) or the CIA's Global Response Staff (GRS). The former arose after the Beirut bombing in 1983; the latter after 9/11. The GRS is largely staffed by former special operations officers, e.g. Navy Seals. Two of the men who died at Benghazi on Sept. 11, 2012, were part of the GRS, Glen Doherty and Tyrone Woods.

A Fatal Visit

Ambassador Stevens had arrived for a five-day visit in Benghazi from Tripoli on Sept. 10. He attended a ribbon cutting at a local school, and opened up an "American Corner" on a city street: a place where Libyans could get bilingual books and films and magazines. (ibid, p. 65) He had five DS agents assigned to him, plus a computer technology officer, Sean Smith.

The State Department compound in Benghazi was not secure even from the Libyan guards hired to defend it. A post-incident review stated that the compound "had

been vandalized and attacked by some of the same guards who were there to protect it." [ibid, p. 67] In fact, at the time Stevens was in Benghazi there was a work dispute going on with these very same guards.

For security reasons, Stevens had not planned on leaving the compound on Sept. 11, which was the 11th anniversary of the 9/11 attacks. During the day, Stevens heard from an assistant that protesters had stormed the U.S. Embassy in Cairo over an insulting video about Islam that had been placed on YouTube, called *Innocence of Muslim*. (p. 76)

A State Department warning was sent out about a danger to local government buildings from Libyans. Stevens was alerted to this but disregarded it. In his last diary entry that night, Stevens wrote about how much he enjoyed being in Benghazi, except for the "Never ending security threats"

Shortly after 9 p.m., a Toyota pick-up truck pulled up in front of the compound. The car had police insignia. It stayed awhile, and then left. An explosion rang out. Dozens of men swarmed the gate firing AK-47s into the air. Some had walkie-talkies. To this day, there is a debate about whether the gate was left open or whether the Libyan guards were coerced into opening it. [Zuckoff, pgs. 83-85]

The militia leader who seemed to have organized the attack was Abu Khattala. [New York Times, Dec. 28, 2013] He had been a leader of the Al Jarrah brigade, which had helped depose Gaddafi with extensive American aid. Some witnesses interviewed by David Kirkpatrick of the *New York Times* said that, during the rioting inside the compound, *Innocence of Muslims* was mentioned. Yet, whether or not the film was the casus belli of the attack or it was simply a pretense used by the main organizer, perhaps Khattala, has become part of a partisan debate, which has obscured some of the larger questions involved.

As calls went out for help, Stevens took refuge with Smith in a safe room part of his villa, led there by a security officer. The attackers could not get into the room but managed to set fire to most of the area outside. The security officer tried to lead Smith and Stevens to a bathroom with an escape window onto a terrace. But en route, he lost Stevens and Smith. He tried going back several times to find them, but could not. He was later overcome with smoke inhalation and collapsed on the terrace.

After a delay of about 20-30 minutes, six GRS officers left the CIA annex, which was about a mile from the State Department compound. They managed to counter the attackers, and they found the body of Sean Smith who was dead from smoke inhalation. They also tried to find Stevens but could not get into the safe room due to fire and smoke.

After the rescuers returned to the CIA annex, they took positions on the rooftops of the main buildings. Several more men arrived from Tripoli in the middle of the night, with the defenders repulsing an attack on the CIA annex. The attackers regrouped and launched a mortar barrage. In the shelling, Bud Doherty, one of the men who arrived from Tripoli, and Ty Woods, part of the rescue team, were killed.

Stevens' body was later recovered by locals. He was taken to a hospital and pronounced dead from smoke inhalation. Stevens was the first American ambassador to die in office in the line of duty since 1988.

A Political Football

The administration sent UN Ambassador Susan Rice out that weekend to make the circle of talk shows relying on talking points that played up the impact of the YouTube video as provoking the attack. [ibid, *New York Times*.] The Republicans seized on Rice's statement, insisting that it was part of an Obama administration cover-up. But as Kirkpatrick noted in his six-part series, the Republicans went overboard in their painting of a conspiracy theory. (ibid)

Yet, there were clearly errors in Secretary Clinton's and the State Department's handling of the Libyan conflict and the resulting chaos. Benghazi was one of the most dangerous State Department outposts in the world, perhaps the most dangerous, yet pleas for enhanced security were bureaucratically rebuffed. The other key error was the delay in getting help to the compound sooner.

But the question that neither side wants to address is the one that Professor Kuperman confronts head on: Would it have been better for Libya and America if the State Department had negotiated with Gaddafi to ease his ouster and, perhaps, have had his son Saif al-Islam take over Libya? Due to the insistence on "regime change," Libya is now listed by the State Department as a failed state. In 2014, it descended into its second civil war in three years. And now Al Qaeda and ISIS have operational cells there.

Lederer and Burdick could not have written a more nightmarish scenario to show the arrogance and short sightedness of American foreign policy. Prominent neocon Richard Perle could not have done worse. Yet, the overriding failure of "regime change" strategies was not the focus of Republican investigations. The Republican-controlled Congress insisted instead on focusing on what Secretary Clinton knew and when she knew it.

As the Benghazi political firestorm swept across Washington, author Mitchell Zuckoff got in contact with the surviving GRS officers who rode from the CIA annex to rescue Stevens that night. Zuckoff, a former journalist and author,

relied on those accounts in *13 Hours: The Inside Account of What Really Happened at Benghazi*, written as a deliberate attempt to sidestep all of the partisan issues that had enveloped the incident.

The book concentrated on the characters of the six GRS contractors, Ambassador Stevens, computer expert Smith, and the CIA chief of station who was fictionally named Bob. The book details the firefights at both the State Department Compound and the CIA annex in extraordinary detail.

Considering the focus of the book, director-producer Michael Bay was a decent enough choice to transform the book into a movie. Producer Jerry Bruckheimer had hired Bay to direct action films like *Bad Boys*, *The Rock*, *Armageddon*, *Pearl Harbor* and *Bad Boys 2*. Bay is strong on technical elements: visuals, sound and editing. He is not so interested in things like story, character development, subtlety, and dramatic structure. But, in truth, Zuckoff's book is not really interested in those aspects either.

To adapt the book, Bay hired author Chuck Hogan, who wrote novels including *Prince of Thieves*, which was adapted into the Ben Affleck film *The Town* in 2010.

Book into Movie

In comparing the book, *Thirteen Hours*, with the film by the same name, there seems to me to be only one really exaggerated scene of dramatic license. When a militia at a checkpoint stops two of the GRS agents, the book does not describe any shooting which followed. (Zuckoff, pgs. 23-25) Bay does show an exchange of fire.

There has been some controversy over whether the CIA station chief actually delayed the rescue attempt and resisted the GRS involvement. But this is all in Zuckoff's book, and he details it profusely. (pgs. 94-102) If it did not happen, then the GRS agents are lying. I suspect the CIA is probably covering for the reluctance of "Bob" to let the agents leave the station relatively unprotected.

One of the problems with the film is that, although it is an action movie, there is a lot of time between the set pieces of violence. And, the running time of the film is well over two hours. Thus, we have a lot of dialogue and scenes where people at the CIA annex are interacting, not one of Bay's strengths. He also didn't seem interested in casting acutely either.

Because of the subject matter, the film spent heavily on the production value and not on performance value. With the exception of Toby Stephens as Bud Doherty, the acting performances are not notable or dynamic. However, with the action scenes, Bay does a decent enough job. They are vividly presented, especially the last mortar attack in which the shells are seen arriving at the

CIA annex in super slow motion.

Zuckoff's book does mention the Internet video in more than one place. But Bay's film makes very little comment on that topic. At the end, after the last attack, the film takes a nihilistic attitude toward the whole affair. The Arab linguist, who the GRS team employed as a translator on their rescue mission, decides not to go with them to the infirmary. He shakes his head in disgust and says words to the effect, none of this should have ever happened.

Before the end titles roll, the film tells us that Libya is classified as a failed state today. We then learn that the five surviving agents who tried to rescue Stevens all resigned shortly after this mission. This is as close as director Bay gets to any kind of political statement, a reflection of the Lederer-Burdick sense of how U.S. foreign policy ambitions often outstrip American ability to achieve those goals and how the misguided efforts result in grave human catastrophes.

James DiEugenio is a researcher and writer on the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and other mysteries of that era. His most recent book is *Reclaiming Parkland*.
