

Rambo on the Barbary Shore: Libya, The Oil Price and the U.S. Polled

by George Caffentzis

The April 15 (1985) "raid" on Tripoli and Benghazi by US fighter-bombers poses two kinds of problems of interpretation—for anyone who stands against U.S. military and economic strategy during this period. The first is to explain the reason for the raid itself, since no serious observer of US behavior accepts the explanation that Reagan, Schultz and Walters have given, viz., Libya is being "punished" for being the "focus" of "international terrorism." The second is to understand the widely divergent reaction to the raid in the US versus the rest of the planet, i.e., the "polls" in the US indicate a 75-80% approval rating for the attack, while throughout the Third World and in Europe there has been a massive condemnation. These phenomena are, of course, not independent. If there was world-wide approval for them, the attacks might have been more devastating, while if the US public "attitude" was negative they might have taken a more "covert" form (as they have in the case of Nicaragua).

I. *That which Allah giveth as spoil unto his messenger from the people of the township, it is for Allah & his messenger & for the near of kin & the orphans & needy & the wayfarer, see that it not become a commodity between the rich among you.*
—*Qur-an*LIX, 7.

As for the first problem, to even begin to get an understanding of the matter we must purge our minds of the mental pollution being spread by the U.S. government, the infinitely pliable U.S. media and the British echo. "Terrorism" is a nineteenth century word and phenomenon arising in the context of the Russian Czarist state where the bureaucratic and industrial machinery was so underdeveloped that it made sense for some revolutionaries to envision that the physical elimination of a small number of officials would seriously threaten the existence of the state.

By the early twentieth century, none but the most foolish could hold to such an illusion in Russia; the even more terrifying automaticity and anonymity of the capitalist state had been set in place. Individuals had become as replaceable as standardized parts for a model-T Ford. Some parts were more important

than others, of course, as the battery is more important than the rear-view mirror, but all were replaceable. Thus in the twentieth century, the use and abuse of terror by no means has vanished (after all, what was the hurried explosion of nuclear bombs on a near prostrate Japan in 1945 about?), but "terrorism" as a political-revolutionary strategy has all but vanished.

That in the 1980s "terrorism" and even "international terrorism" could become terms of political analysis, indeed even the purported definition of anti-capitalist struggle, shows that Power still determines Language, at least in academe and the media. Acts of guerilla war, hostage-taking, piracy, industrial or commercial sabotage (all ancient though not all "honorable" tactics perhaps in the struggle against or between states) have been called "terroristic" not because of anything intrinsic in them but simply because of the aims of their protagonists. For in contemporary parlance, to be a "terrorist act" is to be an act against US interests. This has given a field-day for columnists throughout the world to comment on the hypocrisy of the US state, for absolutely every type of act it has condemned as "terroristic," it or its servants committed, and then some. We might even long for the 1950s when the US ideology of the day was "anti-communism." At least that had some content and we could say with certainty when a state or revolutionary group could be identified independently as "communist."

Now terms like "terrorist international" are purely indexical, i.e., identifiable only with reference to the day-to-day policy decision of Washington. Thus think of the literally hundreds of anti-state armed organizations presently operating throughout the planet from Eritrea to East Timor to Northern Ireland to El Salvador to Nicaragua to South Africa. Which warrants the label "terrorist?" There is so little content in the phrase that, e.g., we have to examine the US State Department's briefings every day to determine whether the A.N.C. is a "terrorist" or "freedom fighting" organization.

The verbal silliness has reached such a point that even the phrase "terrorist state" has now entered into the glossary

of political science. But when examined carefully the phrase is either tautological or contradictory. Tautological, on the one side, since every state ultimately rules through its monopoly of violence and terror, and contradictory on the other, since terrorists are those who are outside the state aiming to physically eliminate its personnel.

But what need Reagan care for such niceties of language and thought? So in 1985 his administration devised a list of "terrorist states:" Libya, Iran, North Korea, Nicaragua, Cuba... Syria(?) This list was faithfully reported and commented upon. Since then, the issue of "terrorist states" has been placed at the top of the agenda of international conferences and bodies like the E.E.C. Do words make reality? No, but if they are US words they appear to.

Yet what do the Juche philosophers, the Shiite theocrats, the Greenbook colonels, and the Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries and bureaucrats of these lands have in common? Not much... except that they find themselves in opposition to quite varied U.S. interests. That anyone can take such nonsense seriously indicates a crisis all right, but it is a crisis in the international channel of communication due to the semantic filth being dumped in it by its most powerful "communicator." Pollution laws should not just deal with physical toxins.

For anyone who is interested in getting a more adequate analysis of the raid, one must lift the incident out of mythological realm of "terrorism" to the very pragmatic realm of international oil prices and interest rates. The oil price is one of the key indices of the world market due to the importance of the petroleum commodity itself and its role as the determiner of other energy commodity prices. This price has had four recent temporal points of inflection: 1974, 1979, 1981 and, most crucially for us, 1986.

US-Libyan relations since 1970 have centered on this index. For the U.S. state considers itself the custodian for world capital of the planet's energy resources, whether these residues of geologic evolution happen to be immediately below U.S. territory or not. This is not a Reagan invention. Carter's, Nixon's and indeed all post-WWII U.S. administra-

tions have affirmed this as an inevitable consequence of world capitalist hegemony. It is ultimately the U.S.'s responsibility to make the commodity form the destiny of Nature.

Libyans, after more than two millennia of struggles against Carthaginians, Greeks, Romans, Vandals, Turks and Italians, found themselves after the coup that toppled King Idris in 1969 sitting on top of large but quite finite supplies of petroleum. Qaddafi is undoubtedly the expression of the Mediterranean-Saharan peoples who have lived on their wits for so long, finally finding the possibility of independent political action, increased mass consumption and capital formation... for a short but precious time. The length vitally depends upon the oil price, hence the Libyan state has been the major hawk in OPEC. Unlike Nigeria, Indonesia and Venezuela, it has a small population; but unlike Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, it has small reserves. Consequently its survival depends upon short-term price considerations. Knowing this allows us to understand the peculiar mixture of rhetoric and pragmatism in Libyan foreign policy throughout the 1970s.

During that decade, US and Libyan interests concerning oil prices coincided. Indeed for all the anti-imperialist verbiage and the ousting of the US from Wheelus Field (once the largest US airbase outside of the territorial US), the US presence in Libya grew, thriving on the commonly desired higher price of petroleum. By 1980, three thousand US businessmen and technicians were there, 10% of US oil imports came from Libya, and 30% of Libyan imports came from the US. The sacking of the US embassy in Tripoli in 1979 seemed to have no impact on the actual commercial and military relations between the two countries.

Further, the Libyan state frequently acted in Africa in ways quite favorable to the US. For example, Qaddafi was decisive in crushing the communist coup in the Sudan against Nimeiry in 1971, and Libya was a conduit for arms and troops for Idi Amin up to his fall in 1979. Thus "former" CIA agents (if such a category exists) were involved in training Libyan regular and paramilitary troops as well as procuring arms in the US. All this high-level hanky-panky was concretized when Billy Carter (the then-president's brother) tried to file as a "foreign agent" of Libya in 1979. He was apparently dissuaded, but the incident shows the interpenetration of these two states until 1981.

1981 is the year of the "oil glut" and marks a nodal point when US-Libyan relations begin to become antagonistic.

The Libyans were still pushing for higher oil prices, but the US had decided that a stabilization of energy prices was crucial. Not surprisingly, it was during this year that the US military first attacked Libyan forces. Two Libyan jet fighters were shot down when they challenged US war planes crossing the "Line of Death" over the Gulf of Sytre.

Given its crucial role, a few words about this "Line of Death" might be worthwhile. In 1979 Libya passed a law that outlawed the renting and leasing of residential housing and gave immediate

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ownership to whoever occupied a house, i.e., occupancy became tantamount to ownership. Libya made a similar principle operative internationally. The historic Gulf of Sytre (where, according to Herodotus, Odysseus was to have stopped and nearly stayed with the Lotophagi) was declared an internal bay and a "line" connecting the lips of gulf was drawn in 1979.

For two years the US made no overt attempt to challenge the claim. It was when the Libyans had to be convinced that their hope for an ever accelerating oil price (envisioned by Carter planners a mere year before) was "unrealistic" that the Sixth Fleet jets trespassed. The message was clear—neither the Gulf nor the petroleum was really owned by Libyans—and the price of oil did stabilize.

No military confrontation occurred after the onset of the 'oil glut.' But between Dec. 1985 and March 1986, the spot price of petroleum fell from \$29 to below \$10 a barrel. Again not surprisingly, the US has attacked Libya twice since the price drop. In March, US planes crossed the "Line of Death" to sink Libyan naval vessels and bomb missile installations. The notice was clearly stated: any serious Libyan attempt to halt the price of oil from stabilizing between \$15 and \$20 a barrel would be met with more physical force. In fact, to make this point, the attacks were timed to take place just before an OPEC emergency meeting. It was a prelude to the bombing of Tripoli and Benghazi in April, whose purpose was to drive home a bitter economic lesson: though the oil was below the Libyans' feet it was not theirs... occupancy does *not* give ownership. The landlord was calling to collect his due.

The lack of any serious state response internationally to the raids indicate that on a nation-state level the US position is ultimately respected, for all the superficial sympathy with the Libyan people. We shall see, indeed, an end to US attacks not with the end of "terrorism" — which by definition is impossible — but with the passing of the reduced oil price. For "Libyan terrorism" is simply the belief that the petroleum resources locked in the Libyans' soil is theirs. Such presumption is intolerable, according to the present capitalist order.

II. *Is there anywhere where our theory that the organization of labor is determined by the means of production is more brilliantly confirmed than in the human slaughter industry?*

— Marx to Engels (1866)

Now that we have dealt with the reasons behind the US raids on Libya in March and April we must turn to the next question: why has there been such a divergence of public reaction to the raids in the US versus the rest of the planet (and Nigeria in particular). Certainly one feels the immediate sympathy for the Libyans here in Nigeria, especially in the North. We must remember that commercial ties between Tripoli and what is now Northern Nigeria go back for thousands of years, so there is much shared knowledge tying together the two ends of the Sahara. Further, given Libya's status as an African OPEC state it is not surprising that even the normally withdrawing Nigerian government was forced to voice some opposition to the US "raids."

But in this piece I want to turn my attention to the modern Sphinx, US public opinion, and try to explain what appears to be an even more upsetting aspect of the raids beside the sheer loss of life: the favorable attitude of the US public, as measured by opinion polls, to the raids. This attitude has been taken by many US spokespeople as a vindication and a go-ahead for any future attacks.

In dealing with such a multi-headed beast of many colors, we should be prepared to find many ironies, riddles and secrets. Since so much is being made of the polls, something should be said about how they are taken in the US and

how the socio-economic development of the Reagan period guarantees that only a certain part of the population will be asked about the raids at all.

For the first thing to note is that these polls are not administered "on the street" or "door-to-door." On the contrary, though it might be difficult for non-wealthy Nigerians (whose public life is so alive) to understand, the average American is fearful of both approaching and being approached on the street and is totally paranoid about opening doors to a stranger. This, of course, is a sign of a very advanced case of social disintegration, but its immediate consequence is that polls are conducted by telephone or through the mails.

This implies that those polled have either a fixed residential or employment address, have a telephone or are literate, and are not "deviant" (i.e., not in prison, living in a shelter, eating out of a soup kitchen, etc.). In the past these conditions might not have seriously effected opinion poll results (except perhaps in the Great Depression of the 1930s), but this is not the case in the Reagan period. Both during the recession years of 1980-1983 and the "boom years" from 1984 the following trends can be noted: an unprecedented increase in homelessness and long-term unemployment, a major increase in basic telephone rates, increases in illiteracy, imprisonment and "deviance," increases in farm foreclosures, increases in the marginality and turnover of employment.

Surely these trends have not affected everyone, but the 1980s have reproduced on an extended scale major disparities between and within the social classes of the US. The most obvious indicator has been the persistence of high unemployment in the midst of one of the longest periods of "growth" in the American economy. This unevenness has a decisive effect on the measurement of public "opinion." For example, in Philadelphia one organization for the homeless is fighting to be able to make a park bench or a parking space a "legal address" so that their members can receive the minimal benefits due to them as human beings and citizens. These homeless people are hardly likely to show up in the opinion polls. Undoubtedly there are Americans who might very well have their homes crammed with computer gear and have a satellite-receiving disc on the roof to catch the latest returns from the Singapore money market. They would be very easy to find and their opinions would be immediately tally-able.

But for the individuals outside the security lock, passing through the anonymous social gallery of marginal, "off the books" jobs, soup kitchens, jails, "half-

way houses," and back to the marginal jobs, these people who are largely Black or Hispanic, what do they think of the US raids? By definition, being unpolled, we cannot "know" their opinion, but one thing we can be sure of: they cannot be frightened by cries of "terrorism," their life is already Hell.

The fact is that though Ronald Reagan is called the "great communicator," he is communicating to fewer and fewer people. He is credited with fashioning a formidable pro-capitalist consensus in the US after more than a decade of wavering, but US society is becoming increasingly divided with the numerical majority being outside of this consensus. Under his rule, the communication channel is narrowing in a period when the technological means for communication are expanding beyond anyone's previous dreams.

This irony is no accident. Any period of rapid capital accumulation and concentration, as is occurring in the US in this decade, invariably leads to the development of social misery "on the other

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pole," both domestically and internationally. Thus the Reagan "economic miracle" and military build-up have been made possible by budget deficits financed by the increased exploitation of Third World peasantries and miners, while the 1980s deflation is the result of the destruction of the US mass production sectors, union-busting, wage cutting and pauperization of significant sectors of the US proletariat. We must take with caution any talk of public opinion in the US now, for the consensus of the vocal makes the silence around them all the louder.

Among the polled, however, there is apparently general support for the April raid as well as for similar attacks in the future. This has been taken to be a great triumph for the communicative gifts of Ronald Reagan and, along with the Grenada adventure, a major change in US polled opinion which appears to be getting over the "Vietnam syndrome." To the more critical, this "triumph" is another example of the power the media have in manipulating the mental life to the US masses. Americans who have been softened up with grisly tales about Qaddafi for years seem more than willing to approve of his literal assassination on the basis of the most flimsy of charges (e.g., Libyan "involvement" in the bombing of a Berlin nightclub). Rambo rules, o.k.

But this account, so congenial to leftist theorists of mass consciousness, runs counter to another stubborn polling result. More than 50% of the polled are against aid to the *contras* in Honduras, while a much higher percentage are against any direct US involvement in Nicaragua. If the polled are so gullible, why haven't they been equally duped by the Presidential persuasion over the "communist-terrorist" threat in the US's backyard? Certainly Reagan has spent much more time hurling invective at the Sandinistas than at Qaddafi (if that's possible).

Some might argue that his variation in response arises from differences in the objects of Reagan's vilification and aggression. Perhaps. But I wish to argue that the reaction differs due to quite realistic assessments (based on limited and prejudicial data, of course) that the majority of the polled have made about the likelihood of protracted war (that might force a mass mobilization in the US) in dealing with either recalcitrant country.

First, Qaddafi is continually presented

as a "loony" dictator somehow disconnected from the Libyan body politic, while the Sandinistas (whatever Reagan might say about them) are clearly not a one-man show. Consequently, there is a belief that a "surgical operation" could conceivably change things in Libya.¹ No one believes this about Nicaragua.

Second, in Libya the form of military action is usually conceived of as being of a highly technological and temporary character (hence the use of the word "raid"), while in Nicaragua (given the long drawn out military failure of the *contras*) it is clear that any serious US intervention will be quite labor-intensive, involving ground troops in a meat-grinder terrain similar to Vietnam's.

Thus Reagan's support is conditional upon the polled's belief that these actions against Libya will be relatively costless. Perhaps Reagan is relying on a historical unconscious which remembers in a very vague way the US "war" against Tripoli in 1803-5. This might be an obscure piece of African history to Africans, but it is presented as an important event in the history curriculum of US primary schools, for it allows the racist presumptions of US pedagogy full play. (Indeed, the "Tripoli War" is "immortalized" in the US Marine Hymn.) The actual details of the story are a bit more grubby than the technicolor illustrations in the history primers, however.



In the early nineteenth century, the "Barbary" states of the Magreb (including Tripoli) declared war on the US since it refused to pay a fixed annual sum to secure the safety of its ships on the Mediterranean. The "war" was carried on in a pretty desultory fashion, with the Tripolitanian corsairs capturing a number of US cargo ships and enslaving their crews. But things got serious when a large US frigate, the *Philadelphia*, was lured close to shore by corsairs. The ship was wrecked and its 307 man crew captured.

When the regent of Tripoli, Yusuf Qaramali, demanded \$3 million ransom for the crew, the US really swung into action. It brought Yusuf's brother, Ahmad, from Egypt, installed him in Derma (a city in Eastern Libya) and

encouraged him to claim the throne of Tripoli. Fearful of an inter-family feud, Yusuf pulled back and accepted a mere \$60,000 ransom for the crew (about \$200 a head) and 'promised' not to interfere with US Mediterranean shipping. (So much for the principle, "Millions for defense, not one cent for tribute.") This was the "great American victory" over the Tripoli pirates. It was neither "great" nor a "victory," but in the vagueness of schoolbook memory the incident is probably remembered as a glorious thrust against "Arab criminals with curved swords" which cost relatively little in life, limb and money. So much for schoolbook history, and history.

If I am right about the reasons for the positive response of the US polled to the Tripoli "raid," then instead of marking

the end of the Vietnam syndrome, it gives it a definitive form. This is also true of the Grenada affair three years ago, which might sound paradoxical since Grenada has been touted as the sign of a new US public attitude to military adventure. But consider the military character of the operation. It took one week for thousands of super-armed US troops supported by the most sophisticated air and naval machines to subdue a tiny, divided and demoralized island. Why? Simply because the main aim of the operation was to lose as few US troops as possible. Hence every move had to be carefully planned and the slightest opposition had to be destroyed from a distance.

Grenada was no Iwo Jima. Militarily it was a catastrophe illustrating the contradictions US military commanders face in the field. As the Beirut car-bombing a few days before the Grenada Invasion showed, it is politically impossible to embark on military adventures where a substantial number of troops could be lost. The main consequence of this is that the "value" of US life forces up the capital-intensity of death production and makes it vulnerable to the problems of all such production: accidents, malfunctions, bad communications, etc. Thus in order to be sure there would be an absolute minimum of US losses, the Libyan operation had to be done at night with planes flying close to the sea; this meant that the whole flight had to be controlled by automated mechanisms. But this total dependence on machines forced a third of the bombers to return to base without discharging their bombs due to equipment failure.

This is a most strange militarism whose premise is the preservation of its personnel. It is one of the most perverse victories of the US proletariat. The image of Rambo is continually used as the representation of the new Reagan militarism enthusing the American masses. But on examining the image, one immediately sees the military defeat implicit in it. For Rambo is a singular killing machine. Gone is the mass soldier of the WWII films.

Rambo is a super death-robot, it might be totally efficient in doing its task, but its task must be extremely limited and, more importantly, it is operable only in a very restricted environment. Rambo's flying cousin, the Cruise missile, illustrates the problems of robotics. The low-flying missiles is guided by a computerized map which it matches with the information provided by its visual sensors. But what happens when it snows? All the landmarks disappear and Cruise goes crazy. Once these real problems are forgotten, we can see Rambo, the muscular killing machine, as speaking to a widespread desire, but that desire is: Let Rambo do it.

True to Marx's axioms, US military policy in the 1980s is patterned on the industrial development and devolution of the US economy in the period. It is premised on the Vietnam era revolt against mass military service between 1965-73, just as recent economic strategy premises the revolt of the mass factory worker in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Further, the military's "solution" — a combination of buying high-tech, automated death machines and hiring out the 'dirty jobs' to low-waged mer-

cenaries abroad — is identical to the economic "solution" — automation and computerization of domestic production and the exportation of "dirty work" to the "dirt wages" of the "free trade zones" of the Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Mexico and so on. To the US proletariat's "Take This Job and Shove It," capital responded by permanent, high levels of unemployment in the US mass production industry and the "internationalization" of labor. Similarly, to the anti-war movement's "Make Love Not

like petroleum has possession in an extremely qualified manner. It can possess the resource only as long as it is actually a commodity which is exchanged according to the rules of the world market, and the final arbiter of this market is the US missile-launching submarine and aircraft carrier. Thus, those nations who have the misfortune to be "blessed by nature" with mineral deposits and oil fields are automatically in jeopardy, continually under surveillance, and open to "justifiable" attack for breach of contract

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War," the US state responded with a nuclear build-up, "Star Wars" and the internationalization of military "man power." The elements in both the military and economic plans are not new, of course, but the mixture of billion dollar city-killing laser satellite systems with \$1000 a year UNITA mercenaries now brings the polarization of the extremes into a historic tension.

III. *But in spite of all your fences
a poppy will bloom in the midst of your
wheat
and as your cold wind rises
it will kindle its red flames
to burn you totally down.*
— 'Chrysoula' from Rita Boumi
Papa's 1000 Killed Girls

This tension is very consciously expressed in the fiscal instability of the US government. For the US deficit (almost twenty times the Nigerian Federal Budget) is simply identical to the increased investment Reagan has directed to capital-intensive killing machines. Ironically, but necessarily, those who actually finance these deficits — the "Third World" proletariat — are the targets of the lasers, the "smart bombs" and the disembowelings that they have bought. It is not the first time the working class has financed its own extermination. As Jay Gould, an American "Robber Baron," said a century before: "I can hire one half of the working class to kill the other half." He forgot to mention that he got the funds from the victims as well.

In conclusion, what are the political consequences following on this analysis? First, the Libyan raids were meant to make clear that any state having "possession" of a vital international resource

with the "eternal" laws of capital. No nationalistic phrase-mongering can deny this reality; only participation in a struggle to totally transform how the gift of billions of years of evolution is used by the human race can change it. Libya is simply paying the price of even slightly tampering with the capitalist metabolism with Nature. That is its state terrorism. Therefore, it is crucial in our defense of Libya that we stick to essentials and not let ourselves be sidetracked by rhetoric from Washington, London, Tel Aviv, or even Tripoli, about what is at stake.

Second, the "consensus" of US public opinion on the raids indicates a crisis for the US proletariat. On the one side it indicates that the previously marginalized proletariat that might have provided some opposition to the state on this matter has simply been pushed over the horizon of communication. On the other side it indicates that the growing unification and identification of much of the proletariat with Reagan's project has a deep flaw: it presumes its own ability to escape risk. The part of the US proletariat supporting Reagan is not fascist, it is in a sense worse, for the fascists at least realized that they would have to do the dirty work. (Some even gloried in it.) As long as the Reagan administration can provide confidence in the automaticity of its very expensive military machine and the mercenary-ization of cannon fodder, then it need not fear any serious domestic crisis around its military adventures. But this "computerized fascist" consensus is extremely fragile and can come down with a single "shock."

— May 1986

Footnotes

1) That is, by a "classical" act of "terrorism."