

Separating Libyan Facts from Bush Fiction

By Ronald Bruce St John | September 7, 2004

Libyan Foreign Minister Muhammad 'Abd al-Rahman Chalgram, on the evening of December 19, 2003, made an historic pronouncement, stating that Libya, of its "own free will," had decided to become completely free of internationally banned weapons. Shortly thereafter, Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi endorsed the decision to renounce weapons of mass destruction (WMD), calling it a "wise decision and a courageous step."

President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair, in separate but coordinated press conferences the same day, hailed the Libyan decision. In prepared remarks, the president urged Libya to continue its support for the war on terrorism, but he did not tie the Libyan announcement to the war on terrorism or the U.S. occupation of Iraq. On the contrary, he accurately stated that the negotiations leading to the December 19 announcement "began about nine months ago." In so doing, he freely acknowledged that the talks began before the United States invaded Iraq.

That said, Bush administration officials quickly began to portray the Libyan decision to renounce WMD as a byproduct of both the Bush Doctrine, specifically its preemptive strike corollary, and the Iraq war. In the 2004 State of the Union Address, delivered four weeks later, the president himself made the connection:

Nine months of intense negotiations involving the United States and Great Britain succeeded with Libya, while 12 years of diplomacy with Iraq did not. And one reason is clear: For diplomacy to be effective, words must be credible, and no one can doubt the word of America.

A Poster Child for Bush's Reelection

Neither President Bush nor Vice President Cheney, in the ensuing nine months, have given a campaign speech without portraying the Libyan decision as a byproduct of the Bush Doctrine and the occupation of Iraq. In totally unfounded, completely inaccurate statements, they have transformed Qaddafi into a poster child for the Bush reelection campaign.

Speaking to a Veterans of Foreign Wars convention in Cincinnati on August 16, the president proclaimed to great applause: "Before September 11th, Libya was spending millions to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Today, because America and our allies sent a clear and strong message, the Leader

of Libya has abandoned his pursuit of weapons of mass destruction. America and the world are safer." Identical words appeared in subsequent campaign speeches at New Mexico State University on August 26 and at the American Legion national convention on August 31.

Vice President Cheney has been even more aggressive in tying the Libyan decision to administration policies. At a campaign rally in Dayton, Ohio on August 12, Cheney made the following statement:

Neither President Bush nor Vice President Cheney, in the ensuing nine months, have given a campaign speech without portraying the Libyan decision as a byproduct of the Bush Doctrine and the occupation of Iraq.



A year ago, Libya had a secret nuclear weapons program. But after our forces ousted Saddam Hussein and captured him in his hiding spot north of Baghdad, Libya's leader, Muammar Qaddafi, had a change of heart. He turned over control of Libya's program, including the uranium, the centrifuges, and the weapons plans, and today they are under American lock and key down at Oak Ridge in Tennessee.

Cheney repeated these overblown claims at an Iowa campaign rally on August 24 and at the Republican National Convention on September 1. Cheney's claims are especially disingenuous. The talks which resulted in the Libyan decision to renounce WMD began in March 2003, before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, as President Bush correctly noted in his December 19 press conference. And the Libyan government had clearly decided to disarm by late September 2003, three months before Saddam emerged from his spider hole, when it invited American and British inspectors to Libya to visit weapons sites.

Further confirmation of the early timing of the Libyan decision came in an October 24 interview I had with Saif al-Islam al-Qaddafi, the Libyan leader's eldest son by his second wife and a frequently discussed potential successor to Qaddafi. In a conversation at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London, Saif spoke enthusiastically about Libya rejoining the international community, including full commercial and diplomatic relations with the United States, indicating that his government would soon be making an "important announcement." While a myriad of small details delayed that important announcement until December 19, the capture of Saddam certainly had nothing to do with the Libyan decision to renounce unconventional weapons.

Coming in From the Cold

The Qaddafi regime has been trying to come in from the cold for more than a decade, as I detailed in a recent article, "Libya Is Not Iraq: Preemptive Strikes, WMD and Diplomacy," published in the summer 2004 issue of *The Middle East Journal* (www.mideasti.org). Informal Libyan overtures, which began as early as 1992, were rebuffed by the first Bush administration and later by the Clinton administration. At the time, Libya indicated that it was willing to discuss a renunciation of terrorism and the abandonment of WMD programs in return for talks aimed at ending sanctions and normalizing relations.

The Clinton administration finally opened secret talks with Libya in mid-1999 aimed at resolving all issues related to the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. When Libyan officials later expressed an interest in broadening this dialogue to include unconventional weapons, the White House

rejected the initiative, electing to remain focused on the Lockerbie issue. The Clinton administration took this decision in the belief that the Libyan chemical weapons program did not pose an imminent threat to the United States while the Libyan nuclear weapons program was in an early stage. Both judgments later proved sound. As the 2000 presidential campaign intensified, bilateral talks with Libya were suspended for fear they would become public and impact on the election.

After 9/11, the Qaddafi regime cooperated with the United States in the war on terrorism, meeting regularly with U.S. officials and exchanging intelligence information. In addition, talks continued between Libyan officials and representatives of the families of the victims of the Pan Am 103 bombing in an effort to resolve that issue.

The talks which resulted in the Libyan decision to renounce WMD began in March 2003, before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, as President Bush correctly noted in his December 19 press conference.

At the same time, the Bush administration ratcheted up its rhetoric regarding unconventional weapons programs in Libya. In 2002-03, John Bolton, Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security, made a series of addresses in which he charged Libya with having active biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons programs. These charges, which continued after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, later proved overstated where not untrue.

In May 2002, lawyers representing the families of the victims of the Pan Am 103 bombing announced that Libya had agreed to pay compensation to the families. Greeted with skepticism, the proposal became reality in September 2003 when Libya accepted responsibility for the actions of Libyan officials in the bombing and agreed to pay each of the families \$10 million for a total compensation of \$2.7 billion.

Seven months earlier, the head of Libyan intelligence in March 2003 had approached the British government, initiating the trilateral negotiations which eventually led to the Libyan pronouncement on December 19, 2003. According to U.S. officials familiar with these negotiations, they were based, like the Lockerbie talks, on an explicit quid pro quo. If Libya would consent to a verifiable dismantlement of

its WMD programs, the United States would lift its bilateral sanctions, possibly as early as end-2004.

The facts of the Libyan case belie the fictions being promoted by the Bush administration. Libya's decision to renounce unconventional weapons was not a product of the Bush Doctrine, the preemptive strike strategy, or the occupation of Iraq. In contrast to Iraq where hundreds of Americans and thousands of Iraqis have died, not a single American or Libyan life was lost in a preemptive war to disarm Libya. Therefore, the Libyan decision to renounce WMD must be seen as a victory for persistent, patient, and traditional arms control diplomacy. If anything, the Bush administration's determination to invade Iraq very likely delayed announcement of the Libyan decision. In the march to war, the Bush administration's model of a rogue state had no place for a voluntary renunciation of unconventional weapons programs.

If anything, the Bush administration's determination to invade Iraq very likely delayed announcement of the Libyan decision. In the march to war, the Bush administration's model of a rogue state had no place for a voluntary renunciation of unconventional weapons programs.

(Ronald Bruce St John, an analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus, has published widely on Middle Eastern issues. His latest book on the region is Libya and the United States: Two Centuries of Strife (Penn Press, 2002).)

FOR MORE ANALYSIS FROM FOREIGN POLICY IN FOCUS:

High Time Bush Defines the Enemy

By Ronald Bruce St John (August 2, 2004)

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0407enemy.html>

Bush Policies Make Terrorism a Growth Industry

By Ronald Bruce St John (May 24, 2004)

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0405terrorgrowth.html>

Libya's Return to the Fold?

By Christopher Boucek (April 2004)

<http://www.fpif.org/papers/2004libya.html>

Libyan Disarmament a Positive Step, but Threat of Proliferation Remains

By Stephen Zunes (January 15, 2004)

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0401libya.html>

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2004. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

"A Think Tank Without Walls"

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to "making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner." For more information, visit www.fpif.org.

Recommended citation:

R. Bruce St John, "Separating Libyan Facts from Bush Fiction," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, September 7, 2004).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0409libyanfacts.html>

Production Information:

Writer: R. Bruce St John

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC

p. 4

www.fpif.org

A Think Tank Without Walls

