

To the Shores of Tripoli

by James Sanzare

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Last year the United States began the process of normalizing relations with Libya after decades of mutual animosity and sanctions disrupted a relationship that goes back 200 years, to when President Thomas Jefferson took our young republic into its first overseas military foray.

Libya's History

The land of modern Libya covers a broad span of history, beginning in ancient times with Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks, Romans, Vandals and Byzantines. The Roman sites, centered around Leptis Magna, are considered the best preserved ruins outside the Italian peninsula. The city of Leptis became important soon after it was established by Canaanites and reached its peak under Roman emperor Septimus Severus. The vast site includes a triumphal arch, huge basilica, forum, public bath, hippodrome and amphitheater. The whole region was Arabized by the Muslim conquest in the seventh century.

As World War II began, Libya was still ruled by Italy, which had occupied it since the beginning of the 20th century. During the war, the legendary British General Bernard Montgomery and German Field Marshal Erwin Rommel fought historic battles at Al Alamein (Egypt), Tobruk, Benghazi and Tripoli. I traveled 400 miles south into the barren desert, and no trees or shrubs were in sight. One can appreciate what soldiers faced in the extreme, unsheltered heat, both in and out of battle. Tobruk changed hands five times, and 3,600 British and Commonwealth soldiers would be buried in its cemeteries. Both Allies and Germans bombed Benghazi, as that city changed hands often as well. More than 11,000 from both sides lost their lives at Al Alamein alone. The British victory there moved Winston Churchill to say, "Before Al Alamein we never had a victory. After Al Alamein we never had a defeat." In total, 27,000 died in Libyan fighting. Even today, in addition to a number of well-kept cemeteries memorializing the fallen, there are highway signs reading: "Caution, do not leave road: landmines." [1] The postwar era found Libya gaining independence from Italy and becoming, in 1951, the constitutional monarchy of King Idris I, who ruled until being overthrown by current leader Muammar Qaddafi's 1969 military coup. [2]

America and the UN imposed sanctions on Libya after the country was shown to be responsible for the 1988 bombing of PanAm flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. After the U.S. embarked on the war on terror after 9/11, Qaddafi renounced terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, leading to the lifting of the sanctions and America's normalizing its relations with Libya. [3]

First Barbary War, 1801-05

American history texts extol the exploits of Lieutenant Stephen Decatur and his encounter with the Barbary pirates. The United States had followed Europe in paying tribute to the Barbary states (Morocco, Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli — Tripoli being modern Libya's precursor) in order that its merchant ships might ply the Mediterranean. When Tripoli demanded a large sum, Jefferson sent the USS Constitution to blockade Tripoli city. The USS Philadelphia ran aground in this campaign, and its crew was taken hostage. In a bold move, Lt. Decatur moved through pirate lines to burn the American frigate to prevent its use by the pirates.

Few texts, however, provide the full chronicle of the first coordinated American overseas land and sea assault on a foreign country. In 1804, tired of the continued pirating and hostage-taking, Jefferson was persuaded by William Eaton, a former officer and now consul in Tunis, to finance and equip a force of eight Marines, some Europeans and 400 Arab mercenaries to invade Tripoli and free the hostages. In Alexandria (Egypt), Eaton organized an army and began the long march to the fortified city of Derna in eastern Tripoli. The battle commenced with three American frigates pounding the forts by sea while Eaton attacked by land. Although America was successful in the fight, its victory proved fruitless when a ship arrived to inform Eaton that no additional aid was forthcoming and he was to end his march on Tripoli. A peace treaty had been negotiated with the pasha, in which the United States agreed to pay \$60,000 for the release of the hostages in return for exemption from paying the annual tribute. [4]

Libya Today

I covered the 600 miles from Alexandria to Derna without encountering the problems faced by Eaton and his mutinous mercenaries. Visiting the place of his unfulfilled victory, now commemorated by Libyan postage stamps as Eaton's "defeat," I found that the site is now, as a final indignity, home to the lavish "1805 Summer Resort." The original intent of my journey was to walk through centuries of history by visiting the Roman ruins and trekking across North Africa in the footsteps of the Allied armies that sought to stop the German advance on the Suez Canal. My barely-concealed second agenda, however, was to peek into the society created by Libya's mercurial and mystical leader Muammar Qaddafi.[5]

Customs formalities at some borders can be time-consuming and tiresome, and colleagues' warnings that they had set up precautionary ransom funds caused me particular anxiety. But crossing the border into Libya, any tension soon eased, and the experience became most enjoyable. While I sat in the air-conditioned van, the travel guide took passports to be stamped—there was no paperwork or baggage inspection. Three young customs officers approached, one in uniform, and began a friendly exchange. [6] They wanted to speak to Americans. They apologized for any delay, explaining, "We haven't installed the computer system ordered from America." My impression and hope is that they represent a new generation coming to the fore, free from the constraints of ideology. Their interest was not politics or war, but "where do you get your internet service?"

One of the young men offered to show us a little-known attraction, a prison where the Germans held British soldiers. What made it noteworthy was a large black-and-white mural painted by J. Brill, a British prisoner, depicting scenes of life in Britain. The police chief, greeting us upon arrival, found that his prison key would not work, but the problem was solved by a large stone, “so the Americans could see the painting.” We laughed at the idea of a police chief breaking into prison.

Libya is 93 percent desert or semi-desert, with only a narrow strip of cultivatable land stretching a thousand miles along the Mediterranean where most of its people live. The coastal climate is moderated by the sea, in contrast to that of the hot desert. Beyond this area is the large, barren, rocky place leading to the vast Sahara (“Sahara” means desert, and so “the Sahara desert” would be redundant). The Ghibli — a hot, dry, dust-laden southern wind that lasts one to four days in the spring — raises temperatures to 110°F.

The vast expanse of desert, while mostly uninhabitable, is rich in two resources essential for Libya’s survival: oil and water. Oil has brought many economic advantages to the country, but many Libyans say that water is more precious. With so much dry land and no permanent rivers, only intermittent streams, or wadis, provide some water when the unpredictable rain arrives. One town I visited has a 25-year cycle between rainstorms. But deep down below the Sahara are vast underground aquifers. To satisfy coastal needs for water, Qaddafi initiated a multibillion-dollar project to build the Great Man-Made River, an underground pipeline 15 feet wide tracking 2,500 miles from the desert to northern cities. Electric pumps bring water to reservoirs, and gravity sends six million cubic meters of water a day northward. Libyans call it the Eighth Wonder of the World.

Oil wealth should have made Libya prosperous, but in earlier years Qaddafi squandered much of the profits on foreign exploits that produced more criticism than success. In the new century, he has curtailed his global adventures, concentrating instead on domestic concerns. He has provided free education through the university level, free medical care, and universal home ownership. Utility services are subsidized. Both national and private health care is available. Consequently, Libya has received consistently high ratings when quality of life is measured.

The private sector is expanding, with emphasis on diversifying the economy. Tourism is now a major priority. The 2003 appointment of Shukri Ghanem, a Harvard-trained economist, as prime minister may have been a sign of the times. There is still much to be done, from minor changes to major undertakings. Credit cards and travelers checks are not accepted, and only one-quarter of Libya’s oil reserves have been explored. (Libyan oil is “sweet,” meaning easy to refine.) We heard over and over again Libyans’ refrain that they “only trust American know-how and technology” to accomplish the latter.

Whether word had gone out from on high or not, I found Libyans’ reaction to Americans to be overwhelmingly sincere. They want to partake of what they see in our culture, and they may also entertain the idea that the more open they are to America, the more open their society will become. Any local who spoke English used the opportunity to do so. Amusingly, however, Qaddafi had ordered early on in his time in office that all road signs be printed in Arabic only, so

road travel remains difficult for Westerners. The logic behind this regionalism: “You don’t see signs in Arabic in Europe, why should we use English?”

No attempt was made to limit our contacts. We were asked only once not to photograph something—Qaddafi’s walled home in Tripoli, where a U.S. missile attack in 1968 killed his adopted daughter. Upon our arrival at a famous mosque and Koranic Institute, our guide explained that due to the busy activity at the center, visitors were not permitted to enter. We could, however, walk around outside to take pictures. As we did, a mullah approached and asked who we were. “Americans” was the password; we were invited inside for a tour. Our Libyan guide was shocked, as this had never happened before. Visiting internet cafes, I found Libyans using the English language on screen, even though Arabic was available. English is taught in school beginning in the seventh grade. Education is compulsory to ninth grade. Elementary school comprises six years; junior high and high school, three each. Most parents send their children to co-ed schools, although all-boys and all-girls schools exist. Some university students study overseas at government expense, and many hope for an opening in America.

When reading Western guides on traveling in Libya, one must note their publication date. The situation can alter so rapidly that a statement from 2002 may already be outdated. One article I had read, for example, said that no internet service was available in the country, but today the internet reaches the smallest desert town. Other guides noted that all vegetables and most fruit must be imported. Now all vegetables are Libyan grown and only some fruit imported. Another warned to expect only religious programs and long speeches by the leader on TV. I noticed satellite dishes on most homes, even in remote villages. CNN, BBC, soccer games, dubbed vintage American movies and sit-coms and just about everything else is available.

At my Tripoli hotel, I had a conversation with a German who had been doing business in Libya for a number of years. He said he was “amazed” by the change he had witnessed over the past two years. “Everything has opened up.” The hotel was hosting an international “Conference and Networking Event” on “Libya: Opportunity and Challenge.” I obviously can’t make a comprehensive judgment on the scale of authoritarian rule—eleven days do not an expert make—but the only evidence I saw of government’s hand was the occasional police road check outside cities, with tourists waved through while locals had to show papers. From arrival to departure we were accompanied by a “government person,” a friendly and helpful young man. Although he was present for our scheduled itinerary, we were free to take off on our own at any time to any place, which I did frequently. A casual walk one evening brought me to what I thought was a riot. People were rampaging; cars were careening down the street. Was I witnessing an uprising? No, Libya had just beaten Egypt in a soccer championship.

There is an open currency black market, but its rate is so close to the official exchange rate that it’s rarely used. Dress is generally Western for men; women are free to wear the veil or not. One rarely sees a woman fully covered. In rural areas, of course, people are more traditional. Men and women walk together or alone in public. Liquor is officially prohibited, but when questioned, many Libyans reported unhesitatingly that moonshine liquor, or the “local stuff,” as they call it, is “available and getting better after years of trying.” The sanctity of the home is respected, so police will not make raids.

Most people have cars, making traffic jams common and crossing the road a risky business for pedestrians. Informal car markets are crowded and make for a real contrast with the nearby camel marts. Although most Libyans are Muslim, the degree of practice varies between individuals. Unlike in Saudi Arabia, expatriates and visitors may attend services at St. Francis Catholic Church in Tripoli or the Anglican church in a neighboring town. Libya has Boy and Girl Scout programs recognized by the World Scout Bureau, which does not permit programs in countries where there would be government interference.

Upon returning home, I checked Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" survey to see its evaluation of the human rights situation in Libya. Much of what it reports is changing for the better. However, the media is still state-controlled, and there is "torture and mistreatment of detainees," many of whom are suspected Islamist guerrillas.

During my visit I never heard the name "Qaddafi" mentioned, although his portrait graced many places. We joked about the variety of poses he assumes. The 62-year-old leader holds no official title or position, being head of neither state nor government, and is known only as the "Leader of the Revolution." No one doubts that he is the font of power and can turn it on or off as he desires. I gathered, however, that he is not as popular as the prevalence of his portraits would suggest. He led the Libyan people through unnecessarily hard times, and they remember this. I believe that this is part of the reason they receive Americans so warmly. Like the millions of Chinese who used to live by Mao's little Red Book, Libyans have their little Green Book - the political, economic, and social thought of Qaddafi. Published in many languages, it's an interesting read. It harangues against representative democracy, the party system and elections, arguing instead for People's Congresses and Committees. I saw no citizen with a copy of the sacred text and have the sense that they dismiss its pronouncements, although Qaddafi continually refers to it and insists that it is being implemented. Copies gather on bookshelves in places frequented by the foreigners who are probably its only consumers.

Some outside commentators suggest that Qaddafi is allowing managed change in order to save himself and secure the throne for his 32-year-old son Seif al-Islam al-Qaddafi. The information revolution is a storm that may force dictatorial regimes to adjust. Is Libya at the point of a liberalizing breakthrough? Libyans questioned give a straightforward answer: "You're not going to tell the people after 35 years, 'we've been doing things wrong.' It will take time."

Libyan Facts

- **Official Name:** Great Socialist People's Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (State of the Masses)
- **Size:** 679,400 sq. miles (slightly larger than Alaska)
- **Population:** 5.8 million (Washington state)
- **Religion:** 97% Sunni Muslim
- **Per Capita Income:** \$6,200
- **Life Expectancy:** 76 years
- **Resources:** Oil, natural gas
- **Leader:** Revolutionary Leader Col. Muammar Qaddafi, since 1969 coup

Notes

- [1] During a recent visit by the German chancellor Schröder, Qaddafi requested compensation for the 15 million landmines that remain in the region.
- [2] For a student-level survey of Libya, see Daniel Harmon's "Libya" in the Modern Middle East Nations Series published by Mason Crest, www.masoncrest.com.
- [3] For a detailed account of Pan Am 103, sanctions and Libya's new direction, see Thomas Omestad's "Follow the Leader" in *U.S. News and World Report*, June 7, 2004.
- [4] For the full story of the U.S. - Tripoli relationship and the attack on Derna, see "The Battle of Tripoli" from www.historychannel.com.
- [5] For an insight into the character of Qaddafi, see the interview he granted to Andrew Cockburn in "Libya: An End to Isolation," *National Geographic*, November 2000.
- [6] A visa is obtained through the Libyan embassy in Ottawa. The form asked education level, religion, marital status. The standard information on the first two pages of ones passport require a certified Arab translation attached.