

# 25 years ago—The first US attempt to murder Gaddafi

Patrick Martin  
28 April 2011

Describing the NATO airstrikes on the residence of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, the *New York Times* reported, “The NATO campaign, some officials said, arose in part from an analysis of Colonel Gaddafi’s reaction to the bombing of Tripoli that was ordered by President Ronald Reagan a quarter-century ago.”

It is worth reviewing that act of American aggression, carried out by a conservative Republican president, because it bears uncanny similarities, in both military methods and media lies, to the contemporary actions of a Democratic president hailed by the liberals.

In his book *El Dorado Canyon: Reagan’s Undeclared War with Qaddafi* (Naval Institute Press, 2003), Joseph L. Stanik gives a detailed picture of the 1986 attacks on Tripoli and Benghazi that were the culmination of a protracted campaign of destabilization waged against the Libyan regime.

Reagan decided on the air strikes in response to the Libyan role in the April 5, 1986 bombing of a West Berlin disco, in which two American off-duty soldiers were killed. Libyan agents organized the attack, which was carried out by two Palestinian men and the German wife of one of the Palestinians, who actually planted the bomb.

US military planners drew up a list of targets in the two main Libyan cities, including military as well as “terrorist training” sites, and adding key government installations as well, on the theory—embraced 25 years later by the Obama administration and NATO—that all government facilities play a role in communications to and within the military.

Reagan’s operatives, like Obama’s, included the Bab al-Aziziyah compound as a potential target for bombing, knowing that Gaddafi and many of his family members resided there.

According to Stanik’s book, Reagan personally

selected Bab al-Aziziyah to be the main focus of the attack. He quotes Admiral William Crowe, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to the effect that “there was strong sentiment for psychological purposes that we should do something to his personal compound and get his communications center and headquarters.”

Lt. Col. Oliver North, a member of the National Security Council at the time, recalled the deliberations, which included the same type of cynical hairsplitting about assassinating Gaddafi offered this week by officials of NATO and the Obama administration.

“Killing him was never part of our plan. On the other hand, we certainly made no attempt to protect him from our bombs. By law, we couldn’t specifically target him. But if Gaddafi happened to be in the vicinity of the Aziziyah Barracks in downtown Tripoli when the bombs started to fall, nobody would have shed any tears.” (Stanik, p. 152)

White House Press Secretary Larry Speakes had even prepared a statement in the event that Gaddafi was killed in the attack, calling his death “a fortunate by-product of our act of self-defense” (ibid).

Unfortunately for the Air Force pilots assigned the mission to bomb Gaddafi’s residence, the desire to kill Gaddafi outweighed the recommendations of the military planners, who allotted six warplanes to each of the three targets in Tripoli.

Reagan personally ordered the Pentagon to shift three planes from the Tripoli military airfield to the Bab al-Aziziyah compound, increasing the number of planes to nine, including two specifically targeting Gaddafi’s residence.

Stanik observes—with the professional military man’s distaste for micromanagement by politicians—“Assigning two planes to attack Gaddafi’s headquarters-residence building certainly increased the

chances of killing or wounding Gaddafi, but that was not the mission's objective.”

Moreover, it endangered the pilots and was described as a “gross tactical error” by the Air Force mission planners.

Since the planes were to attack in succession, separated by 60- to 90-second intervals, the overloading of planes on Bab al-Aziziyah meant that the last of the nine would not hit the target until eight to ten minutes had elapsed, giving Libyan anti-aircraft forces ample time to recover from the initial surprise and open fire.

The result was that one of the later-arriving jets was shot down, with the loss of both airmen, who ejected into the Mediterranean Sea and were drowned.

While the American media depicted the raid as a brilliant success, only two of the nine planes that attacked Bab al-Aziziyah actually struck the compound, with the rest forced to abort because of mechanical difficulties or lack of visibility, while one dropped its load elsewhere over Tripoli, killing civilians and hitting the French and several other Western embassies. All told, 37 Libyans were killed and 93 wounded, the majority of them civilians.

Overall, of the 18 planes dispatched against Tripoli, six aborted, one was shot down, seven missed their targets and, Stanik concludes, “only four put their bombs directly on or very near their aim points.”



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**