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OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

Time's Up, Qaddafi

By CURT WELDON

Published: April 5, 2011

Tripoli, Libya

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Yarek Waszul

IN 2004 I traveled to Libya as the head of a bipartisan Congressional delegation to express support for Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi's decision to give up his country's nuclear weapons program. We met with Colonel Qaddafi, high-level officials and ordinary people, and I even addressed the annual meeting of Libyan legislators.

Neither the White House nor I wanted to lend support to Colonel Qaddafi himself; our goal was to open a new era of engagement between the United States government and American business with the Libyan people

themselves.

Seven years later I am back in Libya, this time on a much different mission, as the leader of a small private delegation, at the invitation of Colonel Qaddafi's chief of staff and with the knowledge of the Obama administration and members of Congress from both parties. Our purpose is to meet with Colonel Qaddafi today and persuade him to step aside.

There is no question that America should play a critical role in helping the Libyans build a new government. Sadly, in the years since my first trip, Washington has squandered many

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opportunities to achieve that goal without bloodshed. And unless we begin to engage with the country's leaders — even those close to Colonel Qaddafi — we may again lose our chance to help build a new Libya.

Despite our stated goal in 2004, and that of two subsequent delegations I also led, America has concentrated on Colonel Qaddafi himself. All contacts went through him or his family, who were given too much say over American-led initiatives. But as we've learned through similar efforts in Azerbaijan and Armenia, the key to promoting reform in a foreign country is to identify and engage with emerging leaders.

Indeed, that's what we intended to do in Libya. But plans for a coordinated effort between Congress and Libyan legislators to nurture a new generation of Libyan leaders never developed. A plan to bring international nongovernmental organizations into Libya to develop its civil institutions never materialized.

Because both the Bush and Obama administrations failed to follow up on those initial efforts, today we have few contacts in the country's leadership beyond Colonel Qaddafi himself, and we have no strategic plan for Libya after he leaves.

A second element to our plan was to promote engagement between American and Libyan business interests, and thus foster the country's free market. But while American companies have made billions of dollars in Libya since 2004, they have failed to engage with anyone but the Qaddafi regime itself.

On a trip to Libya last summer I met with Ahmed Gadi, an engineer at Al Fateh University. I asked how a recent \$500 million contract awarded by the Libyan government to an American engineering company had benefited his students. Not at all, he said; there had been no contact at all. The government and the company preferred to keep the deal, and the money, between themselves.

There's nothing wrong with American companies profiting from business with Libya. But did they also consider their larger responsibility to American interests? And where were the White House and Congress in all this?

Fortunately, despite the bombs still dropping on Libya, it's not too late to act.

First, we must engage face-to-face with Colonel Qaddafi and persuade him to leave, as my delegation hopes to do. I've met him enough times to know that it will be very hard to simply bomb him into submission.

Simultaneously, we must obtain an immediate United Nations-monitored cease-fire, with the Libyan Army withdrawing from contested cities and rebel forces ending attempts to advance.

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Then we must identify and engage with those leaders who, if not perfect, are pragmatic and reform-minded and thus best positioned to lead the country.

For example, Baghdadi Mahmudi, the prime minister, and Mustapha Abdul Jalil, the head of the rebel National Council, should meet with the United Nations envoy to the country, Abdel Ilah al-Khatib, and work out a schedule for fair elections for a new president and legislature. They should also create a committee to develop a new governing framework.

Colonel Qaddafi's son Saif, a powerful businessman and politician, could play a constructive role as a member of the committee to devise a new government structure or Constitution.

The younger Mr. Qaddafi, who has made belligerent comments about the rebels, has his detractors. But he also pushed his government to accept responsibility for the bombings of a Pan Am flight over Scotland and a disco in Germany, and to provide compensation for victims' families. He also led the effort to free a group of Bulgarian nurses in Libya who had twice been sentenced to death.

The world agrees that Colonel Qaddafi must go, even though no one has a plan, a foundation for civil society has not been constructed and we are not even sure whom we should trust. But in the meantime, the people of Libya deserve more than bombs.

Curt Weldon was a Republican representative from Pennsylvania from 1987 to 2007.

A version of this op-ed appeared in print on April 6, 2011, on page A23 of the New York edition.

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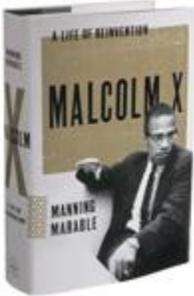
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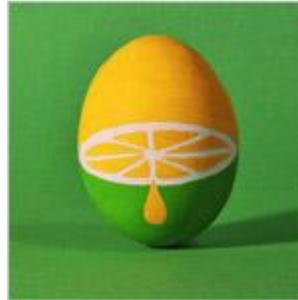
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