

# His Own Worst Enemy

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Sep 22, 2009

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**T**oday, Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi arrives in New York to attend the U.N. General Assembly. Although he hasn't touched down yet, the colonel is already fraying nerves.

In the spring, with the Obama administration in the White House, the old tensions between Washington and Tripoli had started to ease. At the July summit of the G-8 in Italy, President Barack Obama and Qaddafi had one of those handshakes often described as "historic." But, last month, Libya affronted many by giving the Lockerbie bomber a hero's welcome. (A Scottish court had convicted Abdelbaset al-Megrahi of killing 270, including 189 Americans, by blowing up Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988. In August, a judge granted the bomber compassionate release as he is terminally ill.) More recently, the State Department has had to scramble to find appropriate accommodations for Libya's quixotic leader after New York City and New Jersey said they wouldn't allow him to pitch his tent. Most of all, workers in Foggy Bottom are wringing their hands because Qaddafi has a long history of making humiliating statements when he has an international stage.

Thus, as he arrives for a week in the Big Apple, one question looms large: Will Qaddafi restrain himself, helping foster the quiet U.S.-Libya diplomatic rapprochement, or will he let loose, shoot from the hip, and foment outrage?

European leaders have been the most recent victims of the Qaddafi treatment. In the past two years alone, the Libyan leader has managed to embarrass French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, and, most recently, Swiss President Hans-Rudolf Merz. In the last case, Qaddafi upbraided Merz after Swiss authorities arrested his son, Hannibal Qaddafi, for assaulting two maids at a Geneva hotel. The Libyan colonel managed to shame Merz into traveling to Tripoli to issue a public apology -- after, allegedly, threatening to cut Libya's bank deposits and oil exports to Switzerland. With the Swiss public far from amused, Merz's humiliating actions might cost him his job.

Qaddafi appears to take special pride in offending world leaders. Take, for example his treatment of Condoleezza Rice in 2007. Of the then-secretary of state, he said, "I support my darling black African woman. I admire and am very proud of the way she leans back and gives orders to the Arab leaders." Weighing in on Obama, then a senator running for the presidency, Qaddafi said in 2008, "We fear that Obama will feel that, because he is black with an inferiority complex, this will make him behave worse than the whites."

Putting aside the irony of the racism espoused by the current chairman of the African Union, Qaddafi is by any standard a loose cannon. And by virtue of his post in the organization, which is leading peacekeeping efforts in Somalia and Sudan, he will be provided a podium in New York. Ostensibly the colonel will discuss Africa, but what he will actually say is anyone's best guess. Chances are it will be offensive.

For the Obama administration, which is trying to improve diplomatic relations with Libya, Qaddafi's address to the General Assembly could provide some awkward moments.

Consider Qaddafi's performance at the special session of the African Union Assembly in Tripoli earlier this month, where he blamed Israel for being "behind every problem" in Africa and asked the organization's member states to oust all Israeli embassies from the continent. Similar remarks by Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad prompted the U.S. delegation to walk out of a U.N. summit on racism this past April.

Unlike the racism summit, however, Washington will be loath to bolt from the General Assembly. The United States is not only trying to make friends with Libya; it is trying to make an example of it, showing terrorism-sponsoring, weapon-developing countries like Syria and North Korea how to rehabilitate. In anticipation of a provocative presentation, Washington could send a lower-level delegation to the address, but the optics would still be problematic.

Even if Qaddafi refrains from overtly offending Washington from his U.N. pulpit, the colonel will have ample opportunity to make headlines during interviews or town-hall meetings, as he did during his visits to France and Italy. One can imagine the public fury should the Libyan leader again protest -- as he did in France -- that Tripoli has "never committed any terrorist act."

Paradoxically, a public display of affection from Qaddafi toward President Obama -- like a hug during the Security Council meeting -- would also constitute an embarrassment for the administration. Privately, or on second tracks, the relationship is warming. In public, it is still a cold one -- take, for

instance, the State Department's expression of "deep disappointment" over the welcome afforded the convicted Lockerbie perpetrator.

But Qaddafi likely has more reason to act out than to act nice. He likely harbors grievances over the slow pace of legal changes in Washington toward Libya -- a delay he himself has caused. During the rehabilitation process, for instance, he attempted to assassinate then-Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia.

The lesson Qaddafi needs to learn is that the onus for improving the bilateral relationship between the United States and Libya does not lie solely with Washington. Qaddafi's trip to New York is an opportunity to advance the ball, an outcome made possible by the exceedingly low expectations. Based on the Libyan leader's past behavior, the Obama administration has lowered the bar so low that the mere absence of a diplomatic incident during the trip will be deemed a success.

If Qaddafi truly wants better relations with Washington, it's going to require some self-restraint on the part of the Colonel. Unfortunately, however, this appears to be a trait that Libya's 40-year dictator lacks. As such, for the Obama administration, as the General Assembly kicks off, the headaches with Libya are just beginning.

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