

The hubris of Western nations has yielded eight years of chaos and war crimes to a North African nation.

By THE SAN DIEGO UNION-TRIBUNE EDITORIAL BOARD

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- [Facebook](#)[Twitter](#)[LinkedIn](#)[Copy Link](#) [URL Copied!](#)[Print](#)After America's disastrous exit from Vietnam in 1975, many U.S. military and national leaders engaged in soul-searching, determined to learn from past mistakes. This led to years of relative U.S. caution about throwing its weight around in the world. But the assumption that America's military might could provide tidy, even surgical solutions to global problems — reinforced by success ousting U.S. enemies in Grenada in 1983, Panama in 1990 and Kuwait in 1991 — came roaring back.

The results have not been pretty. What author Steve Coll calls America's defining mix of "human fallibility and idealism" has left the nation mired in Afghanistan for nearly two decades. But every bit as much as Afghanistan, the 2011 decision by the U.S. to help force regime change in Libya reflects profound American hubris.

All that most Americans probably remember is that the result was the ouster and assassination of longtime Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi, who ordered the [bombing of Pan Am Flight 103](#) in 1988 over Lockerbie, Scotland, leaving 270 dead, including 189 Americans. But by 1999, Gadhafi was openly seeking U.S. favor, surrendering two agents allegedly responsible for the bombing so they could be tried in Scotland. In 2003, Libya [abandoned](#) its efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction. Gadhafi had followed specific instructions from Washington and London on how to reform and win acceptance from the West. While Gadhafi remained a ruthless dictator, Libya's oil wealth and secular institutions produced a [quality of life](#) that was much better than when he took power in 1969.

Yet in 2011, after a populist uprising in parts of Libya, President Barack Obama and NATO leaders ordered military jets to enforce a no-fly zone over Libya to prevent air attacks on civilians. The alleged humanitarian mission quickly [morphed](#) into an effort to force Gadhafi out — with no thought of what might happen in the power vacuum created by his ouster. In the eight years since, Libya has been plagued by anarchy, a collapsing economy and grotesque war crimes. Thousands of civilians have been killed as hundreds of groups fought for power.

"There is no overstating the chaos of post-Gadhafi Libya," The New Yorker concluded in 2015. The chaos has never ended, allowing Islamic State to use the nation as a de facto [headquarters](#) after its setbacks in Syria and Iraq. The overthrow of Gadhafi also led to Libyan weapons being looted by militias, destabilizing nations across North Africa. This unrest continues.

Yet the reverberations from Gadhafi's ouster go far beyond Africa. Many Asia experts believe the main reason that North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un is so determined to keep building his nuclear arsenal is as an insurance policy to [make sure](#) that he never suffers Gadhafi's fate.

Now Libya is once again in the headlines. Militia leader Khalifa Haftar has built a rebel coalition powerful enough that it [may soon](#) overwhelm the United Nations-backed government in Tripoli. U.S. and NATO leaders are urging Haftar to stand down and accept a truce. Given their history, it's astonishing — laughable — bizarre — that they think they have any credibility. The U.S. and NATO broke Libya.