

Libya is the Acid Test for Bolton Nomination

By Ronald Bruce St John | May 16, 2005

John Bolton has been widely characterized as a combative, intolerant, strong-willed, hard-line, bullying, abrasive, and abusive diplomat. While the evidence suggests these charges are mostly true, they largely miss the point. John Bolton is unfit to be U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, not just because of his management style, but because he has repeatedly distorted U.S. intelligence and misdirected U.S. diplomacy to serve an ideological agenda.

Ironically, it is Libya's decision to renounce weapons of mass destruction, often described by the Bush administration as its finest hour, which most clearly demonstrates Bolton's shortcomings.

Bolton served as the administration's attack dog on the issue of nuclear weapons proliferation for much of 2002-2003. In that role, he repeatedly overstated the threat posed by Libya and other states, often to the dismay of superiors like Secretary of State Colin Powell—who occasionally criticized the tone and content of Bolton's remarks.

In a May 2002 speech to the Heritage Foundation, for example, Bolton charged Libya was “intent on acquiring weapons of mass destruction—particularly biological weapons.” In addition, he said Libya was continuing “its long-standing pursuit of nuclear weapons” and moving to reestablish “its offensive chemical weapons ability.” He repeated these charges in an October 2002 address to the Fourth International Conference on Export Controls and again in a Hudson Institute speech in November 2002.

At the Hudson Institute, Bolton grouped Libya with Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Syria as the states most aggressively seeking to obtain weapons of mass destruction. In so doing, he put special emphasis on Libya's alleged biological weapons program. “A year ago I named publicly several states the U.S. government knows to be pursuing the production of biological warfare agents in violation of the BWC [Biological Weapons Convention]—including Iraq, North Korea, Iran, and Libya. Later in the year I named Cuba.”

Following the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Bolton continued to castigate Libya with what would prove to

be largely unfounded charges. In a late March 2003 speech, he said Libya had been “vigorously pursuing” biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons since the suspension in 1999 of the sanctions imposed by the United Nations in the wake of the 1988 Pan Am 103 bombing. Three months later, in testimony before the House International Relations Committee, he claimed Libya's chemical weapons program was its most advanced unconventional weapons program, but that Tripoli also continued to develop biological weapons. Bolton continued to charge in the second half of 2003 that Libya was “aggressively pursuing” the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction.

Given the insistent—and consistent—nature of Bolton's overblown charges, it is instructive to review what was actually found in Libya once Qaddafi agreed in December 2003 to renounce weapons of mass destruction. According to the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, which oversaw the destruction of Libya's stockpile of chemical weapons, Libya had manufactured a sizeable quantity of mustard gas in past decades and was in possession of the precursor chemicals to produce nerve gas. However, while it also possessed some 3,000 empty bomb casings designed to carry chemical weapons, it lacked the long-range missile or other delivery systems necessary to carry chemical weapons beyond its own borders. The real threat from Libya's biological weapons program also proved greatly overstated. While the Libyans admitted a past attempt to develop biological weapons, no evidence of an active biological weapons program was found. On the other hand, Libya did have an active, albeit struggling, nuclear weapons program, dependent on designs, components, and materials from a clandestine inter-



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national supply network. Yet, experts agreed Libya was years away from actually producing a tactical nuclear weapon.

Even as Bolton continued throughout 2003 to misrepresent the threat posed by Libya's WMD programs, he jeopardized the talks between Libya, Great Britain, and the United States, which Libya initiated in March 2003 and which culminated in the historic Libyan announcement at year-end to renounce weapons of mass destruction. According to a recent *Newsweek* report, the tripartite talks in London proceeded to a successful conclusion only after the Bush administration's top arms control official was removed from the negotiations. Bolton was sidelined after the British complained "at the highest level" (read Tony Blair) that Bolton's obstructionist behavior threatened to torpedo the talks.

In the Libyan case, it is clear John Bolton repeatedly slanted intelligence to conform to his ideological preconceptions. And his extreme and uncompromising line later undermined a promising diplomatic opening, threatening the eventually successful negotiations to persuade Libya to renounce weapons of mass destruction. Based on his performance here, a case better documented than recent policy disputes with the likes of Iran, North Korea, and Syria, it would appear Republican Senator George V. Voinovich of Ohio got it right when he described Bolton as a "poster child of what someone in the

diplomatic corps should not be." It's hard to think of a worse choice to represent the United States at the United Nations—or anywhere else for that matter.

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