

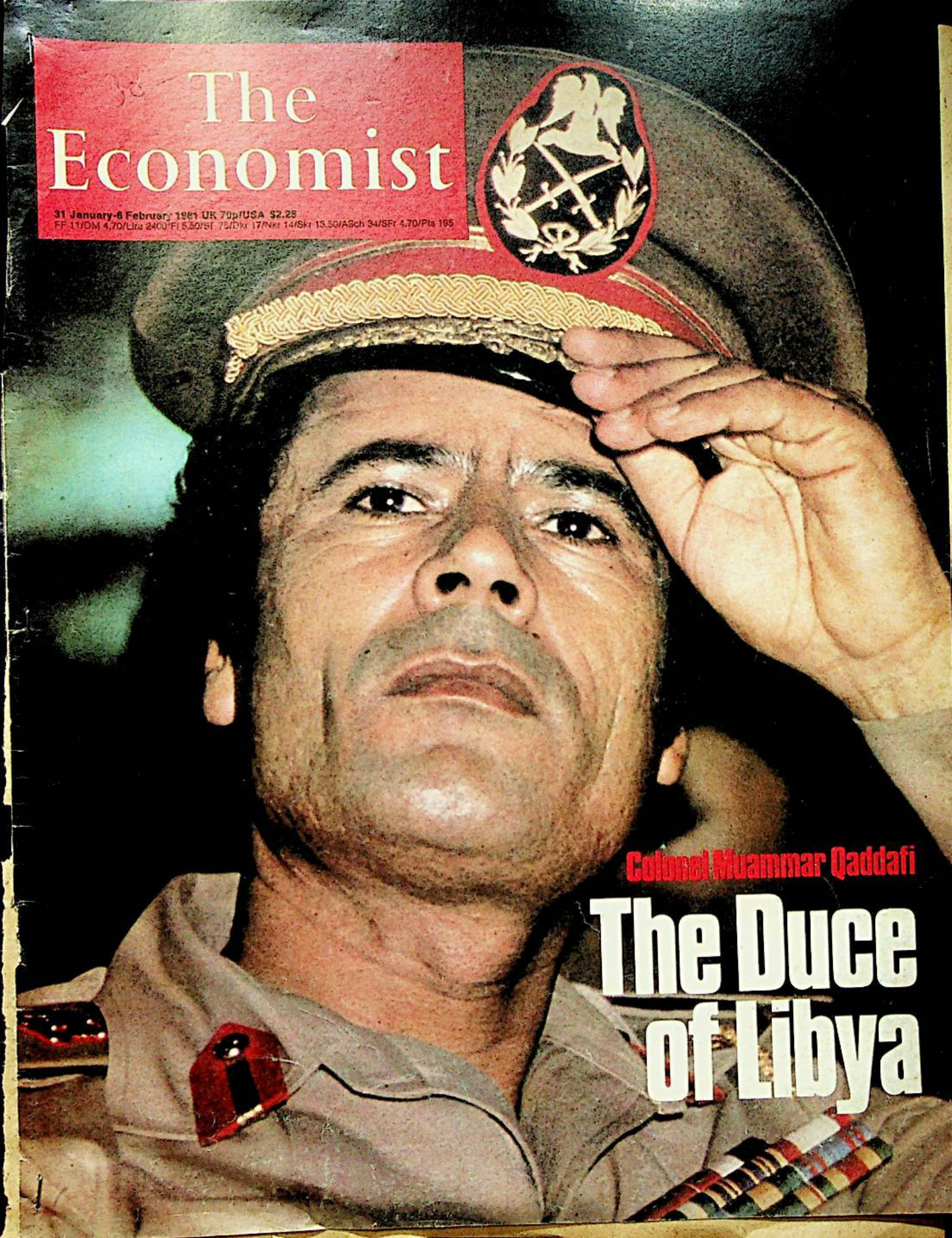
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**Colonel Muammar Qaddafi**

# The Duce of Libya







## The Duce of Libya

In the land of the few, one man armed with a wild dream can be king. After 11 years of trying, Libya's over-equipped, undermanned army this month scored its first undisputed military victory against a ragged army of rebel tribesmen in the baking capital of Chad. If Libya's assault on Chad is consummated by the planned marriage of political union, Colonel Muammar Qaddafi will find himself duce of a desert empire some eight times the size of Britain—but with fewer people (some 7m) than it probably has goats and chickens.

Some of those whom Colonel Qaddafi has pestered in the past (a recent American government report lists 45 countries which have suffered from Libyan meddling) will be relieved to see him become a lord of the desert flies. Colonel Qaddafi's aim of extending his influence to the gentler climes of the Mediterranean were dealt a sharp blow last year, when Mr Dom Mintoff's Malta, after years of friendship with Libya, placed itself under the less demanding protection of Italy. The colonel's attempt to go west and foment an insurrection in Tunisia a year ago flopped. Libyan help for the Polisario guerrillas in Western Sahara has succeeded merely in annoying the guerrillas' other backer, appreciably-less-radical Algeria.

A Libyan-sponsored coup narrowly failed to overthrow President Numeiri of Sudan in 1976. Three years later, a Libyan expedition to help one of the few African rulers less attractive than Colonel Qaddafi, Idi Amin of Uganda, ended in ignominious failure. Libyan goading has failed to crack the next-door Egyptian sphinx. After every door the colonel pushed had slammed back in his face, where else was there to turn but down the open corridor leading south? There a Libyan force of about 4,000 men seems to have been enough to rout a mutinous armed band half its size.

But in taking advantage of the cry for help by Chad's provisional president to seize a drought-ridden wilderness, Colonel Qaddafi has set all of north Africa atremble. Chad's old protectors, the French, were incensed by the very suggestion that they had looked the other way because Libya had just awarded a handsome contract for oil exploration to a state-owned French company. The deal was put on ice and the French fleet was put on alert. French soldiers were sent to the Central African Republic (not a name President Giscard d'Estaing usually wishes to draw attention to

after Bokassa and those diamonds), and more were promised to steady other countries nearby.

Black Africa's only giant, Nigeria, which claims that Colonel Qaddafi has been making mischief among its Moslems, has slung out the local Libyan embassy-by-another-name. Egypt and Sudan have locked arms and pledged to help each other fend off Libyan incursions. The Organisation of African Unity has told Libya to stop tampering with the map of Africa. Colonel Qaddafi temporised by postponing the merger with Chad while increasing the number of his troops there. The colonel's hope of reaching beyond Chad, and uniting some of the most inhospitable land on earth into a giant "Islamic Saharan Republic", is momentarily stalled.

There is more, though, to Libyan intervention in Chad than a curious dreamer building castles in the sand. The Aozou Strip, unilaterally annexed by Libya five years ago, is now unlikely ever to go back to Chad. The strip is thought to ooze uranium, which would be manna to Colonel Qaddafi's nuclear appetite. A fifth of France's uranium supplies come from nearby Niger, where Colonel Qaddafi has been playing politics with the local nomads. There is also a danger that the colonel's brand of Islamic socialism—his "green revolution"—could appeal to other ambitious soldiers in north Africa.

### A straitjacket case

It would be dangerous for the west, supposedly stifened by President Reagan's leadership, to ignore an apparently small annexation in the Sahara. Other revolutions with a roving eye might feel that they could go on getting away with grabbing the country next door while the west watched passively. There is also the little matter of Libya's growing friendship with Russia. The Soviet connection should not be exaggerated. Mr Brezhnev probably trusts Colonel Qaddafi's stability as little as anyone else does. Libya, too wealthy to be bought, could never become a faithful dogsbody for the Russians in the way that Vietnam, Cuba or South Yemen have done. But the Russians and other east Europeans are said to have some 3,000 advisers training Libya's 35,000-man army, many of whose recruits are the illiterate, pressganged unemployed of neighbouring countries. The Libyan army is largely Russian-equipped. The East Germans have a hand in running



Libya's intelligence service.

The western response should be tailored to fit the man. In Colonel Qaddafi's case, a straitjacket seems appropriate. By offering to give more military help to Ivory Coast, Senegal, the Central African Republic and Gabon, and offering to send forces to Niger and Cameroon, France has signalled that any further sally by Colonel Qaddafi's "Pan-African Legion" is likely to come up against the French Foreign Legion. If, as seems likely, the majority of Chad's population that lives in the south of the country decides to resist the colonel's land-grab, they can be backed by western arms and money.

If Libya finds itself in a military quicksand in Chad, and this brings Colonel Qaddafi under pressure at home, so much the better. The colonel's vindictive murder campaign against his exiled enemies in London and elsewhere suggests that he is worried about his hold on his country. Last year's anti-government riots in

Tripoli and Tobruk suggest that he is right to feel insecure. It would be best for the colonel to get the push from within Libya.

Americans have long found it hard to take seriously any performance by the man who gave them Billygate, who recently accused the Boy Scout movement of being a CIA front, and who now claims that the Red Indians are of Libyan origin. But President Reagan, itching for a chance to show America's new steel, has been eyeing the colonel as a suitable case for treatment. For the moment, America's role is best confined to stiffening France's resolve and to giving Russia a clear signal that any increase in aid to Libya will be matched in aid for its opponents in and around Chad. The Soviet Union would then face the prospect of its battered economy springing another expensive African leak (the other being the cost of maintaining Cuba's armies in Angola and Ethiopia)—and might decide that the quirky colonel just isn't worth it.

## Waving or drowning?

It is unlikely that the time has quite come to bid Britain's Labour party goodbye

All through this century the British Labour party has been a coalition between sensible men (who run it not always sensibly while in government) and wilder ones (who pass frightening motions at party conferences while in opposition). A vote-losing conference motion last weekend—announcing that Labour prime ministers could henceforth be annually appointed and sacked by a handful of trade union leaders and activists who have not been elected into any parliament by anybody—has caused 11 of the most sensible Labour MPs to stomp into a poised-for-breakaway Council for Social Democracy (CSD), together with two of the most sensible Labour ex-ministers now outside parliament (Mr Roy Jenkins and Mrs Shirley Williams). An eccentric opinion poll has suggested that this CSD, in alliance with the long-suffering Liberals, would win an early general election, with the Conservatives second and official Labour in third place. Everybody in and on the edge of the Labour party has spent the week being alternately much more truculent and slightly more conciliatory to everybody else.

Despite all this, those who regularly exult at Labour's misfortunes would do well to keep a clear head. The party has written its own apparent obituary—and that of the British two-party system—often enough to shrug off the traumatic prognoses now raining down on it. The CSD bears a marked resemblance in name and people to the Campaign for Democratic Socialism, formed in the early 1960s in the wake of a previous worsening by the party's left wing (the word socialism has significantly slid from noun to abbreviated adjective). Then the social democrats fought back and succeeded in regaining if not the soul of the Labour party at least the right to govern the country in its name.



Since last weekend the unions enjoy—at least until another conference brings yet further constitutional upheavals—a larger theoretical annual veto on the leadership (or 40% of one) than some of the bigger ones among them actually want. But this is little more than a formal recognition of the influence they have enjoyed ever since they bailed Mr Hugh Gaitskell out of successive party conflicts in the 1950s and 1960s. Labour has been the party of the union barons since its formation. They have bought votes and power at party conference and national executive. They have rescued the party regularly from bankruptcy. They have obviated the need for a mass membership, while at the same time sheltering the leadership in government from the pressures of the minority activists who flourished in the vacuum they created.

### Most unions are not Bennite

The union triumph at the Wembley conference was not the victory for the left which Britain's media instantly called it. It is only in recent years that some union leaderships have been pushed leftwards, through determined but reversible infiltration of their policy-making committees and by the corporatist ambitions of the Scanlon-Jones era. There is little love lost between the unions and the Bennite fringe now running free in so many local constituency Labour parties. The odds must be that the power of the trade union block votes will one day swing back to their customary home: behind a leadership sufficiently plausible to give them the hope that they might see Labour back into office, so that it can keep or put pro-union legislation on to the statute book.

Organised unionism is a declining phenomenon in