

**“A Farewell to Libya”**  
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**[Not for citation without author’s permission]**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me first and more foremost thank all of you for coming out for this gala event, thanks to the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Berkeley, with a very special welcome to the family members of Ambassador Stevens that are here tonight. It is always a pleasure to see old and new friends back, some going back decades, particularly tonight as we gather in honor of Ambassador Stevens.

As an academic it is always a particular honor and a pleasure to be asked to give a keynote speech, particularly at an event that is meant to help create opportunities for students to further their knowledge, in this case in Middle East and North Africa studies here at Berkeley. But tonight I do so with somewhat tinged emotions, giving an address that carries elegiac overtones: for, in addition to the opportunities for future scholarships the Ambassador Stevens Scholarship will provide, this keynote is also in part meant to honor the memory and legacy of Ambassador Chris Stevens himself, by focusing in part on his engagement with Libya.

I deliberately chose the somewhat dark title of my address to you tonight— “A Farewell to Libya”—to convey a double meaning. “A Farewell to Libya”—first of all with its elegiac overtones and in allusion of course to Hemingway’s “A Farewell to Arms” with whom my talk shares, alas, an equally sad ending—so far.

It is meant on a personal level as well as a tribute to Amb. Stevens to whom Libya indeed meant a farewell. But in a larger sense “A Farewell to Libya” is also a device to carry across a much larger reality that we are now facing in a country still torn by remnants of a civil war: the realization that for many of us who knew the country well, for those that had come to love Libya despite the dictatorship—the realization that the Libya we once knew no longer exists, and it remains unfathomable at this point if Libya will ever emerge as a modern unified state—after having made three attempts at doing so: at its independence in 1951, after the destructive years of the Qadhafi regime following 1969, and during the continuous chaos after the 2011 revolution.

But let me talk for a few minutes about Libya’s 2011 revolution. There are to all revolutions, during the course of the actual hostilities and in their wake, moments of great enthusiasm, a suspension of disbelief, a conviction that age-old problems and antagonisms can be cleared away overnight. And there certainly was that sentiment in Libya after the death of Qadhafi in October 2011. Colleagues at the university, friends in Tripoli, tribal figures from across the country’s vast territory—almost everyone except for Qadhafi hold-outs—were out waving the new national flag when the national elections in July 2012 took place, the new flag as the symbol of what everyone hoped would be a new country. But, I often reflected afterwards, much of the celebration that day was about the

removal of Qadhafi, and had little to do with the attempt to create a more responsible political system.

How could it be different? I remember talking to Amb. Stevens about this; he had just read a chapter in my book that detailed the enormous challenges a country like Libya would face when even the rudimentary institutions of a modern state are lacking, and where loyalty and interpersonal trust—prerequisites of a democratic system—had often been destroyed in the process. We talked about the almost unavoidable overblown expectations, about the letdown Libya would face once this honeymoon of sorts was over, when this moment of enthusiasm would disappear. Under those circumstances what did elections really represent? Was the cart being put before the horse?

It was hard nevertheless not to be enthusiastic during those early few months and during the first year... Even though I had lived and worked in Libya for over thirty years, interviewed just about anyone who **was** any one during the Qadhafi period—and hence was perfectly aware of how difficult the transition toward a more open political and economic system would be after 2011—I must admit that, much like Amb. Stevens, I remained optimistic as the first national elections took place, and as the country seemed headed in a direction proscribed by a roadmap drawn up during the 2011 fighting. Like him I could not accept that Libya was simply viewed as a sideshow of the broader Arab Spring. Much reflecting his own views, I wrote in an article in *Foreign Affairs* in October 2012 that Libya could be one of the success stories of the Arab Spring. And we shared the belief that Islamic radicalism could be nipped in the bud in the unfertile soil that Libya then represented for such movements, if the West acted decisively.

The criticism we have sometimes heard that Amb. Stevens was a somewhat dreamy diplomat who had gone—pardon the expression, native—did not begin to capture the complexity he understood as very few others did about the dynamics of Libyan society and of unfolding events in the country since 2003. The WikiLeaks cables he wrote from Tripoli when he was Deputy Chief of Mission (from 2007 to 2009), and then the notes from Benghazi later on when he became Special Representative to the National Transitional Council (from March 2011 to November 2011) were clear-eyed and pulled no punches, and he knew he was racing against time, before that window of opportunity for reform closed completely. He had earlier been critical of the reforms Saif al-Islam al-Qadhafi had attempted, noted how the regime and its children had a hand in every pot and, more importantly, that economic reform without political reform would prove impossible. And here Amb. Stevens had been particularly clear: the Qadhafi regime would never attempt serious economic reform because it would ultimately undermine the patronage system on which it had relied since coming to power.

So the 2011 revolution, and despite our realization of the country's fractures, for many of us promised to open a new path for Libya: here were the political reforms augured in by the revolution that promised important spillover effects into the country's economy and its social structures. Important structural changes were needed, but there was hope, and outside expertise, and international support.

But there were also from the beginning pinprick indicators that below this seemingly transfixed, immobile political surface the civil war had in effect imploded whatever weak institutions or conventions the country had left. Those bureaucracies that had haphazardly—and often under conditions of bribery—provided some guidance during the Qadhafi years were quickly submerged

and taken over by social forces and groups whose loyalty laid with tribe, family, region—all of these navigated by untold militias whose loyalties were often ephemeral and shifting.

And there had been an early indication, in July 2011 already, of more ominous developments to come. Perhaps none to my mind was more symbolic and real than the death of Abdel Fateh Younis, a military commander from eastern Libya who had allegedly been killed by an Islamist militia. But it was in the aftermath of his death, at a hasty press conference led by one of the new provisional government's leaders that the social realities of Libya stood to me clearly revealed: the sole representative of the transitional government was surrounded by nothing but members of the Obaydat, the tribe Younis had belonged to: in a display of power and defiance, tribesmen overwhelmed those representing the central government. And there were a thousand other anecdotes of defiance against what the new Libya would represent: the ransacking and tearing down of certain mosques, the defacement of women on election billboards, the vicious graffiti that came to replace the graffiti of Qadhafi during the revolution.

Perhaps the hardest for all of us was that many of the evils that had once been assigned to the Qadhafi regime—the disappearances, the torture, the isolating of individuals and families, the confiscation of passports—now became commonplace in 2011 and beyond as the revolution began to devour itself. The Political Isolation Law represented a purely punitive mechanism to effectively remove some of the country's best qualified individuals from office, including President Mughariyef who for over thirty years had led the opposition to Qadhafi.

The atmosphere eventually became a lot more tense. Foreign security organizations, often with extremely or no knowledge of the country, became part and parcel of daily life. After living and working in the country for over thirty years, I was suddenly told while working for the Carter Center by a young security manager who had been in Libya for all of two weeks, where I could walk and when I had to be back at my hotel. And there were more ominous signs as well. On a walk home one late night I encountered three young men, each with a gun, casually leaning against the wall, but observing the neighborhood. The usual greetings were friendly, but there was a bit of a swagger, something I had never noticed before. And a couple of days later I encountered a security truck with German shepherds in the back. Small anecdotes, but I knew that beside the big political changes taking place in the country, these little episodes were, for me, truly A Farewell to the Libya I had known so well.

The removal of Libya's dictatorship raised significant worries over how its new rulers would create, virtually *ex nihilo*, new governing institutions and a sense of identity and community out of the ashes of a history that since 1969 had glorified the very destruction of those institutions. Indeed, the challenge was turning the subjects of a former dictator in an oil state where economic hand-outs substituted for policy into real citizens, with a sense of political responsibilities, duties and obligations that citizens have toward the state that governs them. How could the country's new rulers prevent individuals or groups pursuing their own interests at the expense of the nation? In sum, how heavily would the shadow of the past weigh on the new Libya - and to what extent would those past legacies also become a shadow of the country's future? To all of those questions we now have answers.

As a popular quip in Libya noted in the wake of the revolution, 'there is a little Qadhafi in all of us.' Although the former dictator had insisted that his political system embodied a perfect democracy—no wonder Libyans are weary of the concept!!—he in effect had systematically destroyed not only

modern democratic institutions, but also the supporting norms and arrangements—trust in the system, interpersonal trust, the willingness to provide guarantees to those who lose out in political contestations—that sustain democratic systems.

Even so, and something Amb. Stevens would have to deal with, Qadhafi's distrust of central authority was itself a symptom of a profounder and older Libyan phenomenon: the tension between a hinterland culture and the culture represented by the country's urban areas that dates back to a historical period preceding even the country's independence in 1951. Libya's modern history in part reflects the contestation of these two cultures over power and national identity. In the power vacuum left in the wake of the 2011 revolution this contest resurfaced—with two or three governments now vying over whatever truly national institutions are left (the LIA, the NOC and the CB), not surprisingly the cash cows of Libya's economy.

It was into this heavy legacy that Amb. Stevens found himself returning to Benghazi while the revolution was still raging. In a conversation he conveyed that he understood that many of the massive reforms advocated for damaged political systems like Libya are bound to fail, especially in places like Libya where coercive power is not centralized. The alternative was in part the attention he lavished on projects that could have an impact on the daily lives of Libyans. A lot of ink has been spilled over the events of Benghazi, much of it unfortunately for partisan purposes, but this is perhaps neither the place nor the time to fuel that unfortunate fire further.

I wonder if instead, and instead of the usual peroration for a keynote, I could finish this talk with part of a poem written in the wake of Amb. Stevens' death by Amb. William Roebuck who in early 2013 became chargé d'affaires in Libya—a poem that is in many a personal and bittersweet lament written in the wake of a personal and a professional loss:

A couple of unread Dickens novels lie on the dresser,  
Amid a jumble of diplomats' business cards,  
Libyan mini-flags and a mug celebrating Free Libya;  
An adored son's photo, caught in some version of high school glory,  
Lies in the small pottery dish, atop collar stays and Special Ops coins.  
A bottle of Laphroaig off to one side beckons with peaty arrogance.  
"The Good Wife" peeks out behind a slim biography of a now-forgotten president.  
A huge mirror looms over all, casting reflections that remind and distort.  
Mirror-lined closets extend this view, which ricochets off  
To the balcony behind, stacked with patio furniture,  
And beyond, to an embassy background of rebar, razor wire, and perimeter walls.  
It is his dresser, his closets, his room.  
When I look into the mirror, I see his toothy grin,  
His sunny optimism, his modest self-assurance,  
His legion of best friends and broken hearts.  
Nothing remains in the room of his time, just some bits of tennis gear,  
A reminder of happier days, an athlete's ease.  
I get dressed in the morning, and review  
The little index card of meetings  
I go to each day;  
They all say they're sorry, amidst the urgent  
Change of subjects, to Cabinet reshuffles, unruly militias,  
The democratic transition, and whither Libya.  
It should be him talking to young Libyan students,

Learning English and dreaming of becoming doctors and engineers

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The lumbering motorcade eventually returns to the embassy:

“Sierra One, Georgia motorcade, two mikes out.”

It should be Tinman rolling back up to Embassy Tripoli,

Emerging from the armored suburban,

And telling the security team he is done for the day.

That is it. Day is done.

I remove my tie and venture a look,

Give a small laugh;

It is his laugh, and mine.

Lights out.

The unforgiving Libyan sun has long since given way to the softer light

Of nearby villas and perimeter wall lights.

The dresser is still visible, the mirror has gone dark:

No burning compound visible in the mirrored backdrop.

I think back to that long night last September: the frantic phone calls,

The unreliable shards of information, the series of urgent plans drawn up and discarded,

The crushing news,

And no time to mourn, then or later.

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One of the battle cries of the revolution in Libya in 2011 was *libiya hurra* (Free Libya!). Amb. Stevens, like many of us, perfectly understood that simply getting rid of a dictatorship doesn't mean freedom—even if many Libyans thought it did—and that to get to freedom one must traverse a long and difficult road—especially treacherous in Libya where none of the prerequisites for a responsible use of freedom, leave alone of practicing political freedoms, were present when the revolution occurred in a vacuum where the notion of a state or nation had never resonated among its people. Freedom, like democracy, is a mosaic, with multiple pieces and compromises that are needed to create a durable structure.

In a couple of personal conversations about politics in general I had with Amb. Stevens he never talked about the big buzzwords like freedom and democracy that continually invade international and state-building development debates. He knew that what was needed in a society as fractured as Libya were those thousand little pieces of confidence, of incremental change, of priorities, that could help rebuild the country again—or perhaps, more accurately, build it for the first time. On the morning he died he was meant to meet with a team that represented precisely one of those small pieces, one of those priorities that could change the lives of many Libyans—a delegation from the United States that was meant to bring badly needed emergency medical technology and eye care equipment to Benghazi and beyond.

We can of course not know how successful he would have been in the end—Libya has been a country that for over seven decades has been notorious for upsetting the best-laid plans and intentions. Let us hope, however, that some of Amb. Stevens' enthusiasm, his can-do attitude, his realism in dealing incrementally with almost insurmountable problems, his ability to convey personal warmth and charm under difficult conditions—that all of this will leave a legacy for the future, and that it will be an encouragement to the young Stevens scholars that will propel them forward with equally admirable qualities in the interest of our country and in the interest of Libya.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all very much.