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WikiLeaks cables show Lindsey Graham as senator-diplomat

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WASHINGTON — On Aug. 14, 2009, Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., met with Moammar Gadhafi and the Libyan dictator's son in a tent in Tripoli in the middle of the night.

The elder Gadhafi, tired from fasting in preparation for Ramadan, was largely silent as his son, national security adviser Mutassim Gadhafi, ranted that the United States hadn't adequately rewarded Libya for giving up its nuclear program in 2003 and renouncing terrorism.

Mutassim Gadhafi asked Graham, who was accompanied by Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Joe Lieberman, a Connecticut independent, to help deliver eight C-130 Hercules military transport planes Libya had purchased — in 1972.

Political disputes between the countries had grounded the aircraft. They've sat in limbo at Dobbins Air Reserve Base, outside Atlanta, for almost four decades.

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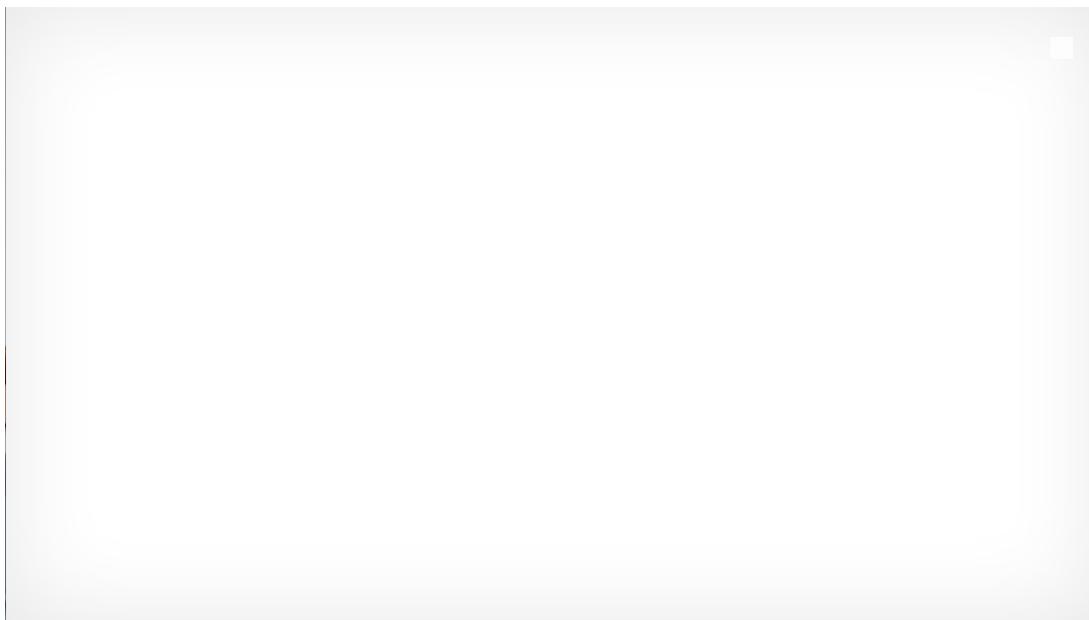
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A cable from the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli describes the meeting:

"Senators McCain and Graham conveyed the U.S. interest in continuing the progress of the bilateral relationship and pledged to try to resolve the C-130 issue with Congress and Defense Secretary Gates."

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Graham chuckled Thursday when he was asked whether he'd ever delivered on his pledge to the Gadhafis to endeavor to free up the C-130s.

"We never did anything," the senator said. "I didn't feel comfortable pushing the Pentagon to provide military aircraft to Libya. None of us did."

Graham's meeting with Gadhafi, and many other such episodes, are described in secret State Department cables that McClatchy obtained from WikiLeaks, a self-described "nonprofit media organization" that's released tens of thousands of U.S. diplomatic documents in the last year in defiance of government secrecy laws.

Dozens of cables reveal Graham's meetings with dictators, heads of state, military strongmen and communist chiefs around the globe over the last seven years.

The cables show Graham, 55, a member of Senate Armed Services Committee, as a kind of shadow secretary of state negotiating an array of sensitive matters, from terrorism and war to Iran's nuclear ambitions, North Korea's missile tests and China's currency manipulation.

The Graham that emerges from the cables is somewhat at odds with his public persona as a colloquial, loquacious senator who loves the limelight and is never at a loss for words. Away from Washington, outside the United States and in private meetings with foreign leaders, Graham comes across as quieter and more circumspect. In these meetings, Graham the polished pol gives way to Graham the diplomat.

Graham, after meeting Thursday in Cairo with Egyptian military and opposition leaders, criticized WikiLeaks as betraying important confidential communications with the cables' release.

"It compromises our national security and has a chilling effect on candid conversations with world leaders and military officials," Graham told McClatchy from Cairo. "Some of this stuff is life and death. You have to conduct foreign policy with a certain amount of privacy and candor."

Army Pfc. Bradley Manning was detained in April 2010 and is being held at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., on charges that he passed to WikiLeaks 250,000 U.S. diplomatic cables from a classified Internet network to which he had access.

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Graham, who was heading a congressional delegation on a Mideast tour and visit to NATO headquarters in Brussels, said that he and Gen. Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, the head of Egypt's ruling military council, told their governments' diplomatic aides Thursday to stop taking notes at the meeting because of the WikiLeaks controversy.

"It's changed the way all of us think and interact," Graham said. "We're more cautious."

Graham said Thursday that he was following a tradition of South Carolina politicians who've been deeply engaged in international affairs, among them the late Reps. Mendel Rivers and Floyd Spence and the late Sen. Strom Thurmond.

"We live in dangerous times," Graham said. "There are people out there trying to hurt our country. Personal relationships matter. The relationships I have established with the leaders of these countries help me be a more effective leader."

On Dec. 6, 2008, Graham delivered a polite but stern message to Pakistani Prime Minister Yousuf Raza Gilani.

Their closed-door meeting in Islamabad, with McCain and Lieberman, came 10 days after suspected Pakistani terrorists killed 164 people in coordinated attacks on hotels and restaurants in Mumbai, India.

Graham informed Gilani that his government had to move quickly against those responsible for the massacre to forestall possible war between the two longtime hostile neighbors. On a return visit a month later, Graham expressed impatience with Pakistan's failure to prosecute the masterminds of the attacks.

The senator pointedly reminded the prime minister: Six Americans had been murdered in Mumbai.

The senators were freshly arrived from neighboring India, where Prime Minister Manmohan Singh had thanked them for helping to shepherd a controversial U.S.-Indian nuclear cooperation treaty through the Senate.

Pakistan viewed that accord's potential to bolster India's nuclear weapons program as a threat to its national security.

In New Delhi, Singh had told the senators on Dec. 2, 2008, that he was under enormous political pressure to retaliate with force against Pakistan for the Mumbai attacks. He asked them to convey to Pakistan the urgent need to crack down on the perpetrators.

A Dec. 8, 2008, cable to then-Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice from the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad describes Graham, McCain and Lieberman pressing Gilani on his government's response to the horrific Mumbai slaughter.

Gilani made an astonishing admission, one that the proud Pakistanis would never make in public.

"We want to combat terrorism, but we don't have the capacity," Gilani said.

The prime minister said his government needed more U.S. aid — beyond the \$11 billion it already had received since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks — in order to defeat radical Muslims in the South Asian country.

"If we fight our own war (against terrorism), it won't give rise to anti-Americanism," Gilani said.

His argument left Graham, newly elected to his second Senate term, unimpressed.

The South Carolina Republican — using careful diplomatic terms instead of the folksy banter he favors back home — told the prime minister that such new aid, if it were delivered at all, would come with strings attached.

It would have to be earned, Graham said, by concrete Pakistani actions.

Graham said Thursday that the South Asia "codel" — congressional delegation trip — to South Asia had been planned before the Mumbai attacks. He, McCain and Lieberman landed in New Delhi five days after the bloodbath, with India and Pakistan on a sadly familiar path that's seen them go to war four times in six decades as independent nations.