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West Exacerbates Libyans' Suffering

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The tendency of public officials to misstate and mislead is well established. Put three national leaders together and the deceptions more than triple. At least, that is the lesson from the article, “Libya’s Pathway to Peace,” authored last week by President Barack Obama, Prime Minister David Cameron, and President Nicolas Sarkozy.

The falsehoods begin with the title. The allies have joined the insurgents in a civil war against the previously recognized government. The path is war and all that entails: death, destruction, and chaos.

One still can argue that the policy is justified. But self-proclaimed humanitarian hawks hate to admit that it is war they are making. The mere threat of intervention is supposed to be enough: Muammar Qaddafi was just supposed to “go.”

Still, there’s nothing to worry about. Only bad guys die and only good consequences occur in humanitarian wars. When conservatives like George W. Bush bomb another country, it necessarily is a costly disaster. When liberals like Barack Obama do so, it necessarily is a grand success. By definition.

After proclaiming that the pathway is one to peace, the three leaders stated: "We are determined to look to the future. We are convinced that better times lie ahead for the people of Libya, and a pathway can be forged to achieve just that."

Will the people of Libya be allowed to take the path *they* choose? The allies talk of conducting "military operations today to protect civilians," but, in fact, these operations are intended to change the combat balance. The allied coalition has taken sides in a civil war. As a result, the Big Three are rerouting the path to the future.

That would be fine if the contending sides were simply Muammar Qaddafi versus George Washington. But there is no evidence that the leading advocates of war actually know anything about Libya or its people. The country is sharply divided by region and tribe. Qaddafi represents one cluster of interests; the opposition represents a very different set.

There is reason to hope the latter wins. But the rebels appear to include a mix of urban youth (good), Qaddafi defectors (not so good), and radicals/jihadists (very bad). The allies do not know to whom they are lending their air forces. If Qaddafi is defeated, the real battle will begin. Alas, the good guys often lose such struggles. Remember Shapour Bakhtiar, the moderate Iranian prime minister who was ousted by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and assassinated while living in exile in Paris. Are the allies really prepared to let the Libyan people choose their future, irrespective of the consequences?

Most dishonest, though, is the professed justification for intervening. The leaders write that the West had to act as "Libya descended into chaos with Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi attacking his own people." Actually, there was chaos because *the Libyan people rebelled*. That's fine—as Thomas Jefferson once wrote, "the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants." But Qaddafi did not create the chaos.

Moreover, he was using brutal military force to restore regime control, not to commit mass murder or genocide. Nasty, but hardly unusual. Casualties climbed because the rebellion spread. The U.S., Britain, and France all have fought similarly bitter, brutal, and costly campaigns against insurgents at home and abroad. The three leaders may regret those past campaigns (winning the American Civil War, suppressing Irish independence, combating counter-revolutionaries in the Vendee), but policymakers in those same nations also turn a blind eye when convenient to modern abuses: Turkish brutality against Kurds, Algeria's bloody internal strife, Russia's horrific campaign in Chechnya, Syria's violent crackdown, Bahrain's Saudi-backed campaign against the Shiite majority.

Indeed, Qaddafi's character as a terrorist and aggressor was established long ago, yet all three nations welcomed the onetime pariah back into polite international company and bought his oil. Indeed, the State Department's last annual human rights report referred to Libya as an "authoritarian regime" and cited such abuses as "torture, arbitrary arrest and imprisonment," and much more. The allies' newfound concern for humanitarianism is a trifle convenient. If the Big Three were so determined to create a "pathway to peace" in Libya, why didn't they destroy Qaddafi's military a few years ago?

Of course, the fact that one cannot invade every nation, despite Nicolas Bonaparte Sarkozy's blustering against all Arab leaders, does not mean one cannot act in one nation. However, blatant inconsistency and hypocrisy require at least a plausible justification. Qaddafi's speech on

Benghazi does not offer one. The three leaders contend that the Libyan dictator threatened to inflict a “bloodbath.” He did not. His rhetoric was directed against rebellious fighters. Perhaps he still harbored murderous designs, but in none of the cities he recaptured did his forces stage a “bloodbath.” The claim about imminent massacres looks a lot like the Bush administration’s fraudulent warnings about Iraqi nuclear weapons and “mushroom clouds” across America.

Still, the American president, British prime minister, and French president warn that Qaddafi’s “rockets and shells” continue to rain down upon “defenseless civilians.” That’s because the Libyan leader is attempting to retake rebel strongholds and lacks the precision weapons possessed by his better-armed enemies in the West. And the war continues because the allies intervened enough to even the odds, but not enough to enable the opposition to win.

The point deserves repeating. Most Libyan civilians are dying today because their country is convulsed by civil war. By prolonging the war the allies have increased suffering. In fact, war advocates are employing a simple but bloody bootstrap argument: intervening has made the war costlier to average people, and that higher cost justifies more intensive intervention. It’s an ingenious but dishonest argument.

Perhaps most problematic is the allied leaders’ contention that their purpose “is not to remove Qaddafi by force,” but that “so long as Qaddafi is in power, NATO must maintain its operations.” Similarly, the three close their article: “Britain, France, and the United States will not rest until the United Nations Security Council resolutions have been implemented and the Libyan people can choose their own future.”

The UN resolution focuses on protecting civilians from harm, not enabling the Libyan people to elect a new leader. The allies have no legal authority for regime change, but nevertheless appear dedicated to regime change. How do they plan to square the circle?

Although a potent symbol, Qaddafi is not the basic problem. His departure tomorrow would not guarantee peace and democracy. He is supported by a range of tribal and regional interests that also have little incentive to concede power. His successor would be no more ready to embrace the rebels, let alone everything else that Western governments hold dear.

Moreover, the allied leaders are not putting their militaries where their mouths are. Demanding Qaddafi’s ouster wouldn’t be so perverse if the enthusiasts for war were willing to use sufficient force to oust Qaddafi. But while air power can hinder offensive action, yet again it has proved insufficient to alone defeat stronger ground forces. Indeed, Qaddafi’s supporters quickly adapted to the allied air strikes, leading the rebels to complain about insufficient assistance.

President Obama promised that the Libyan operation would run for “days, not weeks.” Now he talks of a military “stalemate.” The allies hope for Qaddafi’s flight or ouster, but wishful thinking is no policy. Are they prepared to maintain a desultory bombing campaign for months?

Paris wants to expand the bombing, but that bandwagon is a unicycle. *No other government* responded to desperate British and French pleas for additional assistance at the NATO foreign ministers summit last week. Messrs. Cameron and Sarkozy got the war they wanted, but which their countries were not prepared to wage. In these circumstances, will any of the Big Three use ground forces if that is the only way to force a decision?

The Libyan war seems almost unique in its mix of frivolous decision-making, confused objectives, minimal benefits, and bungled execution. The best outcome is just a small train wreck. But if the quality of arguments on public display by the three leaders represents the quality of decision-making behind the scenes, the result is likely to be far costlier for the Libyan as well as allied peoples. Yet again, we see why war should be a last rather than first resort.

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