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[Doug Bandow](#) - Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute

Fiasco in Libya: Fools at War

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President Barack Obama's poll ratings for national security are falling. As they should. The war in Libya increasingly looks like America's next geopolitical train wreck.

Hope for a quick rebel victory is now a distant dream. Western officials are talking about a military stalemate with no political solution in sight. NATO governments face the possibility of a long war -- or "kinetic military action," in Obama administration parlance.

The Western powers wax eloquent about saving civilian lives even as they sustain rather than resolve a civil war. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dismisses proposals to intervene in Syria with the claim that President Bashar Assad is a "[reformer](#)." The president averts his eyes from Bahrain, where the Sunni monarchy has crushed Shia democracy protestors with the aid of Saudi Arabian troops.

The U.S. is turning Libyan operations over to NATO, but only America has the military power necessary for sustained operations. The administration wants Muammar Gaddafi out, but won't take the steps necessary to oust him. Now NATO is threatening to bomb the rebels if they violate human rights. And Great Britain is warning that it might prosecute defectors from the Gaddafi government even as it encourages defections from the Gaddafi government.

The administration wants to peacefully convince Iran and North Korea to eschew nuclear weapons. [But the allies are bombing a country which voluntarily abandoned its nuclear weapons program.](#)

This is a policy?

The only good news about Libya is that it is not likely to turn out as disastrously as Iraq. It is not as important and strategically located, is not tied to Iran, and has not consumed the same amount of American resources. But hoping the train wreck will be small offers scant comfort.

The initial decision to intervene was foolish. The president's claim that the situation constituted "an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security" of the U.S. was nonsense. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates admitted that no vital interests were at stake.

Warnings about regional stability were laughable: Africa and the Middle East long have been roiled by bigger conflicts. Washington's invasion of Iraq was far more destabilizing. Libya was transformed by unrest in its neighbors, Egypt and Tunisia, not the other way around. If Arab nations felt concerned about the strife, they were capable of acting. Egypt's military alone could have turned the tide in Libya.

Humanitarianism offers no better justification. Gaddafi's brutality was long known. Nevertheless, he was turned into a Western poster child for reform after his celebrated turn from proliferation and terrorism. Two years ago the Obama administration and some of the senators most loudly demanding regime change today -- [John McCain, Lindsey Graham, and Joseph Lieberman](#) -- were talking about providing Gaddafi with military aid.

The president's forecast of an impending "humanitarian crisis" with the possibility of "a bloodbath" involving "many thousands" of deaths was the liberal equivalent of George W. Bush's warning that Saddam Hussein could set off mushroom clouds in America. Gaddafi is a thug, but committed no mass slaughter in any of the cities he recaptured. His superheated rhetoric cited by President Barack Obama was directed at rebellious fighters, not citizens. Maybe Gaddafi would have gone on a murderous rampage. Maybe Saddam Hussein would have developed WMDs. Preventive war was not justified in either case.

Indeed, the president apparently succumbed to the curious bloodlust extant on the left. When initiated for "good" reasons, war becomes virtuous, bloodless, and costless. Only bad guys die. There are only positive consequences. Killing and bombing become the new moral norm.

Alas, that isn't war. Unsurprisingly, NATO airstrikes sometimes have hit the wrong targets. Moreover, this civil war, like most others, is not as simple as advocates of intervention imagine. On both sides people are fighting for a mix of tribal, personal, and political reasons. Defection from the regime does not magically wash blood off of hands: After Foreign Minister Moussa Koussa defected, the British government refused to promise him immunity from charges for past terrorist activities, most notably the Lockerbie bombing. While the equities run toward the rebels, it is no slam-dunk.

Otherwise NATO would not be threatening to bomb the opposition. It turns out that in captured territory the insurgents are not treating suspected Gaddafi supporters with particular gentleness. No surprise, since revenge is common in civil wars. Explained an unnamed Obama administration official [in the New York Times](#): "We've been conveying a message to the rebels that we will be compelled to defend civilians, whether pro-Qaddafi or pro-opposition." Thus, he added, the administration was "working very hard behind the scenes with the rebels so we don't confront a situation where we face a decision to strike the rebels to defend civilians." The administration could save money by using the same planes to bomb both sides.

More bizarre, however, is the desire to oust Gaddafi without doing what is necessary to oust Gaddafi. Even though the president asserted that until Gaddafi steps down "Libya

will remain dangerous," that doesn't mean using military force. Rather, White House Press Secretary Jay Carney spoke of "[nonlethal means, nonmilitary means](#)."

However, as critics warned, the proposed no-fly zone was inadequate. Indeed, the proposal turned out to be a lie used to win political support. A European diplomat [told](#) the *New York Times*: "The no-fly zone was a diplomatic thing, to get the Arabs on board."

Even after NATO started providing close air support for rebel ground operations, the Western alliance only evened the odds. Gaddafi's forces quickly adapted, shedding their uniforms and downgrading their vehicles to "technicals," or armed pick-up trucks. Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, [observed](#): Gaddafi's "got mobility. He's got training. He's got command and control, communications, a lot of which the opposition just doesn't have."

In fact, the rebels are, in the main, poorly led and trained -- "[a pick-up basketball team](#)" in the words of James Clapper, the Director of National Intelligence. A recent meeting of three rebel leaders went sour: "they behaved like children," [complained](#) Fathi Baja, head of the opposition political committee. Nevertheless, when the opposition fighters were forced to retreat, they blamed the lack of allied air strikes.

Now NATO officials are talking stalemate, even partition. The possibility of another failed state looms.

The president promised that the military operation would run for days not weeks. Alain Juppe, the French foreign minister, [said](#) weeks, not months. But we've already passed days and are into weeks. Will the U.S. and Europeans maintain air operations for months, if necessary? House Armed Services Committee Chairman Howard McKeon (R-Ca.) points to Iraq as precedent. There the allies maintained no-fly zones for years, before finally invading.

Enabling a long-term civil war would be no humanitarian accomplishment.

The world would be a better place if Gaddafi ended up in the legal dock somewhere. But it's not clear that his replacement would be better. The point is not that there are no genuine liberals in the opposition. Senators Lieberman and McCain, done supporting arms for Gaddafi, claim that the Transitional National Council "[is led by moderates](#)."

Perhaps, but the latter are not alone. Also apparently active are former jihadists, some of whom fought in Afghanistan and Iraq against the U.S. Other contenders for power include Gaddafi defectors and fighters concerned more about tribal and regional interests than democracy. Supposedly the CIA is now on the ground to gather intelligence about the Libyan opposition. That should have been done before lending the insurgents America's air force.

Anyway, Western-style liberals often lose post-revolutionary power struggles. A century ago the Bolsheviks triumphed in Russia. More than three decades ago Islamists grabbed power in Iran and communists won control in Nicaragua.

If Gaddafi falls, will Washington intervene to ensure that the "right" people take power? And stay in power?

Finally, there is the credibility argument. Having demanded the ouster of Gaddafi, how can the U.S. allow him to survive? Having endorsed the opposition, how can the U.S. let it fail?

The administration's ill-considered promises are no basis for an unnecessary war. If Gaddafi survives he likely will be angry but contained, deterred from taking action that would trigger retaliation and his ouster. Other thugs watching his experience already have learned the most important lesson: use maximum force early to quash protests before they spread.

Moreover, the world's sole superpower would survive the embarrassment. Washington should not go to war whenever a U.S. official says something stupid. That's no reason to kill and risk being killed.

Anyway, let Europe lead. The Europeans have a greater interest in what happens in Libya. Nicolas Sarkozy appears to be playing the little Napoleon to help his reelection campaign next year. He should use his own nation's military for that purpose.

Despite the formal turnover of operational responsibility to NATO, the U.S. continues to participate in military strikes. And that almost certainly will continue. Explained Admiral Mullen, if the situation of the opposition becomes "[dire enough](#)," NATO's commander could request American support.

War should be a last resort. President Obama has made it his first choice. The U.S. has minimal security and economic interests at stake. The humanitarian balance is complicated and Washington's willingness to overlook human rights abuses elsewhere is embarrassing.

Even worse, having chosen to go to war, the administration has mismatched political ends and military means. Everyone wants to oust Gaddafi, but no one wants to do what is necessary. The administration has set the stage for the third interminable military intervention in a Muslim land in a decade.

We might get lucky and Gaddafi might fall or flee. But if he is simply replaced by a son or associate, peace and democracy are unlikely to result. Hoping to get lucky is no basis for U.S. foreign policy. Especially when lives are at stake.

The administration should begin a speedy exit from Libya. Washington doesn't need another disaster in the Middle East.