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American People Should Hold War Lobby Accountable for Libya Debacle

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Will America ever again be at peace? A new war always seems to start before the last one ends. The U.S. is bombing targets in Syria and sending troops back into Iraq. Yet Washington's involvement in Afghanistan persists as the administration considers slowing the withdrawal of American forces.

Worse, pressure is building for the U.S. again to intervene in Libya. It took a decade before the sectarian flames fed by the invasion of Iraq exploded into the Islamic State. It took less than three years for the administration's intervention in Libya to create similarly spectacular blowback. Observed Glenn Greenwald, "Libya has rapidly unraveled in much the way Iraq did following that invasion: swamped by militia rule, factional warfare, economic devastation, and complete lawlessness." The country of Libya has ceased to exist.

This debacle offers a clear lesson for American policymakers. But denizens of Washington never learn from the past. Indeed, Samantha Power, one of the most consistent advocates of a militarized foreign policy, complained that "one has to be careful about overdrawing lessons" from failed interventions. In her view the fact that America's constant wars have resulted in constant failures—and constant pressure to intervene again to confront the new problems created—is no reason to be more careful in the future.

Like many presidents in other conflicts, Barack Obama lied the American people into war. The administration presented the issue as one of humanitarian intervention, to save the people of Benghazi from slaughter. Moammar Khadafy, administration officials claimed, threatened murder and mayhem if he recaptured the city.

Ironically, for decades the West did not take his rants seriously; only when they thought it to their advantage did the U.S. and Europe react. Although he was a nasty character, he had slaughtered no one when his forces reclaimed other territory. In Benghazi he only threatened those who had taken up arms against him. In fact, the allies never believed their rhetoric. They immediately shifted their objective from civilian protection to regime change, providing just

enough military support to upend the balance of forces but not enough to quickly oust him. The world's greatest alliance allowed the low-tech civil war to burn for months, killing thousands. Some humanitarian operation.

Still, the chief advocates of what has come to be called Hillary's war claimed success. Anne-Marie Slaughter, formerly with the Obama State Department, authored a celebratory *Financial Times* article entitled "Why Libya sceptics were proved badly wrong." Even before the fighting ended she was selling the conflict: "it clearly can be in the U.S. and the West's strategic interest to help social revolutions fighting for the values we espouse and proclaim." The *New York Times* ran a "news analysis" entitled: "U.S. Tactics in Libya May Be a Model for Other Efforts." Power then was silent about the danger of overdrawing lessons from the Libyan war.

The War Lobby imagined a beautiful democratic future. Slaughter cited the fact that "The National Transitional Council has a draft constitutional charter that is impressive in scope, aspirations and detail—including 37 articles on rights, freedoms and governance arrangements." What more could be necessary?

Alas, Libya was an artificial nation. Khadafy held it together through personal rule, not a strong state. When he died political structure vanished. Khadafy was brutally executed; revenge killings and torture were common; black African workers were blamed for the old regime and abused. Khadafy's arsenals were looted, with weapons, including anti-aircraft missiles, flowing outward. The country split apart geographically, ethnically, ideologically, and theologically.

Libya quickly went from disappointment to mess to catastrophe. Wrote the *Economist*: "Libya has two rival governments, two parliaments, two sets of competing claims to run the central bank and the national oil company, no functioning national police or army, and an array of militias that terrorize the country's six million citizens, plunder what remains of the country's wealth, ruin what little is left of its infrastructure, and torture and kill wherever they are in the ascendancy." Today these warring factions have divided the territory known as Libya into two broad coalitions.

"Operation Dignity" is a largely secular grouping including Gen. Khalifa Haftar's "Libyan National Army" and the internationally recognized government. The latter was pushed out of the capital of Tripoli last August and is headquartered in Tobruk and Bayda in the east. Haftar, a former Khadafy general, is a man of flexible loyalties who spent years in the U.S. and offered to run for president if "desired" by the people. Last May he launched his campaign against the Islamist militias with covert support from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

"Libya Dawn" is a mix of Islamists, moderate to radical, and conservative merchants which now controls Tripoli. They are backed by Qatar, Sudan, and Turkey, and deny that the Islamic State poses much of a threat. Indeed, government spokesman Jamal Haji Zubia claimed that "these terrorists" merely pretended to be from ISIL, but instead were Khadafy supporters who "put on the mantle of the Islamic State."

The civil war has been intensifying, with combatants utilizing heavy weapons and even air power. Last year fighting forced the closure of the U.S. embassy. Even before the rise of the

Islamic State radical jihadists flourished; the city of Derna sent many young men to Iraq and Syria. Some of these groups were responsible for the attack on U.S. consular compound and murder of U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three others in Benghazi more than two years ago.

Now Libya has become an ISIL outpost. Aref Ali Nayed, representing the official Libyan government in the UAE, said “Libya is becoming the gas station, ATM, and airport for ISIS.” Three jihadist groups have formally claimed allegiance to the Islamic State. Benghazi, the city which helped trigger Western intervention, is now mostly in radical hands. Self-proclaimed Islamic State forces have attacked oil installations, killed journalists, and bombed embassies and a luxury hotel frequented by Westerners.

The conflict has seeped out of Libya. Warned the *Economist*: “Arab tribes and other ethnic groups in the country’s rugged south are running amok, smuggling arms, trafficking people and providing havens and succor to assorted ne’er-do-wells and jihadists pledging allegiance to al-Qaeda and even to the murderous Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.”

ISIL’s murder of 21 kidnapped Egyptian Coptic workers triggered retaliatory airstrikes by Cairo, and then, in turn, Islamic State attacks on an airport and the Iranian ambassador’s residence as well as several car bombings. Thomas Joscelyn of the *Long War Journal* noted that ISIL’s power has been overrated. But the group is gaining influence as the national wreckage known as Libya is being pulled into the regional sectarian maelstrom.

So much for Hillary Clinton’s splendid little war.

Obviously, Khadafy’s continued rule would have been no picnic. Nevertheless, he offered an ugly stability which in retrospect looks better than chaos, civil war, and terrorism. And worse may come. UN envoy Bernardino Leon worried: “Libya has the same features of potentially becoming as bad as what we’re seeing in Iraq and Syria. The difference is that Libya is just a few miles away from Europe.” British envoy Jonathan Powell warned of the emergence of “Somalia by the Med.”

Although Islamic State bluster about “conquering” Rome obviously is just that, Libyans have been fleeing across the Mediterranean in search of safety and work. European officials now worry about larger refugee flows, drug and weapons smuggling, and new terrorist attacks. After more than a year of unsuccessful attempts at mediation between the warring factions, Powell warned: “Libya is far too big to contain.”

In Libya, as with most other failed interventions, war advocates say the problem was that America didn’t stick around. They enthusiastically, even gaily, blew up another country, only to blame the rescue personnel for not showing up fast enough. The *Washington Post*, one of the war’s cheerleaders, complained that NATO “abandoned Libya.” But exactly what could the alliance have done? The allies only played a supporting role; the Libyans *liberated themselves through their own boots on the ground*. The militias fighting now would have resisted any foreign occupation, even if organized by the Pentagon rather than the *Post*.

Alas, this disastrous history hasn't precluded new proposals for Western involvement. Abdullah al-Thinni, Libya's official prime minister, wants the allies to come back. He asked that the "world powers stand by Libya and launch military strikes against" the Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliates.

Egypt and France urged the UN Security Council to meet on the issue. "What is happening in Libya is a threat to international peace and security," explained Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi. Italy also is demanding unspecified action. Prime Minister Matteo Renzi advocated that the UN run a "stronger mission." Defense Minister Roberta Pinotti said "We have been discussing this for months but now it has become urgent. The risk is imminent, we cannot wait any longer. Italy has national defense needs and cannot have a caliphate ruling across the shores from us." Interior Minister Angelino Alfano warned of the potential for an attack on the Vatican.

Unfortunately, there's no reason to believe that the second (or third) time would be the charm. The Atlantic Council's Karim Mezran observed: "There are no good guys or bad guys there—both sides have been acting in bad faith."

The West naturally favors the internationally recognized government. But these forces are divided and Haftar, the dominant figure, is a dubious ally. Although better armed than the Islamist forces, he probably has fewer fighters and less popular support. Worse, an unnamed administration staffer told the *New Yorker's* Jon Lee Anderson: "The U.S. government has nothing to do with General Khalifa Haftar. Haftar is killing people, and he says he is targeting terrorists, but his definition is way too broad. Haftar is a vigilante. And the predictable result of his vigilantism is to unite the others."

Intervening against the Islamist-oriented government would make enemies of many people not linked to the Islamic State. This regime denounced the Egyptian airstrikes as a "treacherous aggression" and "terrorism." Egypt's retaliatory attacks were directed at militants in camps *different from those who murdered the Copts*. Warned the *Post*: "Just as [Egypt's al-Sisi] makes no distinction between terrorists operating in the Sinai Peninsula and the democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood politicians he deposed in a 2013 military coup, Mr. Sisi does not acknowledge a difference between the Islamic State militants and the Libya Dawn faction in Tripoli."

The best outcome would be a national unity government as backed by the U.S. and five European governments. They said in a recent statement that those opposing a democratic transition "will not be allowed to condemn Libya to chaos and extremism." Alas, Libya already is there. The *Post* urged "concerted pressure" on Libya's two major factions to create an effective government. However, it's not clear what more the Western powers can do. Anonymous UN officials told Fox News that NATO was ready "to support Libya with advice on defense and security institution-building." But lack of knowledge is not the problem.

Who is able to act on such knowledge? Libyan blogger Mohamed Eljarh urged international support for "Libyan partners ... who stand for inclusion, democracy, and the rule of law. Such Libyan voices are indispensable to any international or regional solution." But where are they and, more important, what can they do? The *Economist* called for diplomacy to produce a

national unity government and federal system with substantial autonomy for cities and regions. Yet in the next breath the magazine acknowledged: “it has to be admitted that such schemes have rarely worked in the winter-takes-all Arab world.”

More practical would be to acquiesce in the partition of what never was an organic nation. In the meantime the West should consider selectively lifting the arms embargo to aid groups likely to combat jihadist forces. Official Libya’s UN ambassador Ibrahim Dabbashi indicated interest in international aid, but explained: “we must have the arms to not only be able to fight the terrorists, but need to be able to destroy them if they try to re-establish in our country.” Doing so might fuel the ongoing civil war, but with no settlement in sight Washington’s highest priority should be enabling local parties to defeat groups of greatest concern to America.

Moreover, Libya’s neighbors should act rather than wait helplessly for Washington to do something. America’s security dependents might be no more effective than the U.S.—indeed, retired Egyptian military officers warn against their nation being drawn into combatting an insurgency—but the region’s stability is these nations’ business. They should put their arsenals filled with expensive American-made weapons to practical use.

Libya’s collapse has been almost total. Alas, the consequences will linger for years if not decades. The Obama administration’s greatest foreign policy mistake can’t be undone.

Yet, complained Daniel Larison of the *American Conservative*, so far “the supporters of this disgraceful and unnecessary war have faced no backlash or even much serious criticism.” As the problems metastasize with the rise of ISIL in Libya, however, the American people may be more inclined, contra Samantha Power, to critically assess the judgment and competence of Washington policymakers. When war-happy politicians, including Hillary Clinton and her gaggle of Republican rivals, next stand before America, voters should hold these pitiful policymakers accountable for the disaster they created in Libya.

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