

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Published on *The National Interest* (<http://nationalinterest.org>)

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Interventionist Addiction: U.S. Troops in Central Africa

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October 21, 2011

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President Obama [announced](#) ^[3] on October 14 that the United States would send approximately 100 “military advisers” [to assist the Ugandan government](#) ^[4], and probably the governments of South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo as well, to combat the Lord’s Resistance Army. The LRA, led by Joseph Kony, is a shadowy, cultish insurgent outfit with a vaguely Christian orientation. That factor was the apparent reason why some religious conservatives in the United States, [most notably Rush Limbaug](#) ^[5]h, have spoken out in defense of the armed group.

Most evidence indicates that the LRA is a sleazy faction that has sown terror and bloodshed throughout several portions of Central Africa. Nevertheless, President Obama’s decision to involve U.S. military personnel in that conflict is disturbing on several levels. First, it is the latest example of an arrogant, unilateral presidential decision to send American troops into a combat setting. Obama cited his role as commander-in-chief of the armed forces and his responsibility for directing the foreign policy of the United States as justifications for this deployment. It is an interpretation of executive power that would make the Founders whirl in their graves. When it comes to matters of war and peace, Congress is supposed to make that determination, not the president. This decision adds yet another item to an ever-lengthening list of presidential abuses regarding the war power.

Second, the deployment of military advisers always entails the risk of escalation. The extreme version of that process occurred in Vietnam with the initial dispatch of a few hundred advisers. Soon there were thousands of combat advisers in the country, and ultimately vast numbers of combat troops were sent. Although that is unlikely to happen in this case (in large part because the American people probably would not tolerate it), the danger cannot be dismissed entirely. After all, even the intervention in Afghanistan was originally quite modest in terms of the number of personnel, but we now have nearly 100,000 troops on the ground. It would hardly be shocking if the original contingent of 100 in Central Africa becomes several hundred or more, if there are American casualties or the mission does not seem to be succeeding.

Third, and perhaps most important, this intervention is yet another example of an unnecessary and ill-considered armed humanitarian venture. The usually sensible Paul Pillar [assures us](#) ^[6] that going after the Lord’s Resistance Army is justified and not like the missions in Somalia in the early 1990s or Libya this year. But it is very much like those interventions—as well as the U.S.-led wars in Bosnia and Kosovo—in one important way. It has no connection whatsoever to tangible (much less important) American economic or security interests.

Intervening in dangerous conflicts when such interests are not at stake fosters a very bad habit. Nasty things happen to innocent populations all over the world at any given time, and there will always be constituencies both in the United States and internationally wanting (often demanding) that Washington “do something” to stop the bloodshed. When decisions about using the U.S. military are detached from sober considerations about whether important American interests are at stake, the door is wide open for every manner of ill-conceived crusade.

The U.S. political and policy elites increasingly display signs of being addicted to interventionism, with the American people paying the price in both blood and treasure for that addiction. Sending troops to Central Africa to meddle in an utterly murky conflict is a symptom that the interventionist addiction is growing worse.

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