

The American Conservative

“Responsibility to Protect” Seems To Be Good at Starting Wars, But Not at Limiting Them

Posted By [Daniel Larison](#) On March 23, 2011 @ 3:39 pm In

At the end of an [op-ed](#) ^[1] defending Obama’s handling of the war (such things apparently do exist), Lawrence Korb writes this [bizarre concluding sentence](#) ^[2]:

But given the way Obama has handled it, U.S. strategic interests and prestige are likely to be enhanced, even if Libya becomes another Lebanon.

By “another Lebanon,” does Korb mean that U.S. strategic interests and prestige will be enhanced by our contribution to the fueling of the beginning of a fifteen-year civil war? Wouldn’t the collapse of Libya into a prolonged civil war be laid at the feet of the outside powers that kept Gaddafi from defeating the rebels? Isn’t it possible that intervening may create the conditions for ongoing conflict that will take many more lives than would have been lost otherwise? Or does Korb mean that this will go down in history as the sort of remarkably stupid meddling in the internal affairs of a country torn by civil war that Reagan did in 1982-83? Were U.S. strategic interests and prestige enhanced by that experience? If Obama has drawn the U.S. into another Lebanon-like situation, the only word to describe that would have to be disaster.

One point that Korb overlooks is the contradiction between what the U.S. and our allies are authorized to do and the goals that several of our allies (and perhaps the administration?) appear to have. This is the contradiction that David Rieff [criticizes](#) ^[3]. Korb is effectively defending Obama’s policy on the assumption that the policy is more or less the one that Rieff would endorse: a purely defensive action designed to protect civilians against massacre. The problem with Korb’s defense, as Rieff’s protest shows, is that this is not actually the policy of the U.S. and our allies as it is being implemented. As Cato’s Benjamin Friedman has [pointed out](#) ^[4], the coalition is using defensive tactics, but it has offensive goals. Friedman wants the U.S. to get out of the war, but argues that whichever government continues to prosecute it should acknowledge what it is actually doing in Libya:

If we can disengage and leave the bombing to the Europeans, I hope we do so. But whoever is taking the lead should acknowledge that they are sponsoring rebels aiming to overthrow Qaddafi and adopt a policy that does more than defend them.

One problem with the war is that it is just enough of a “responsibility to protect” intervention that some of its supporters will not want to see it turn into a war for regime change, but it has already morphed into just enough of a war for regime change that it cannot be limited by its original “responsibility to protect” justification. “Responsibility to protect” is a doctrine that justifies initiating hostilities, but it has no way to restrain the forces that starting a war unleashes. This makes it a doctrine that is easy for interventionists to invoke to get into a conflict, and equally easy to ignore once the conflict begins.

Rieff writes:

But from the beginning it has been clear that while this intervention has been couched in the language of humanitarianism and of the global good deed, invoking the so-called Responsibility to Protect (R2P), the U.N.’s new doctrine that is supposed to govern those instances when outside powers must step in militarily to prevent tyrants from killing their own people, the more important goal has been to support the insurgency, which is to say, to bring about regime change.

The difficulty that Rieff’s position creates is that it is doubtful that Libya’s civil war qualified for a “responsibility to protect” intervention, but more important it is hard to see how any government could intervene just a little and then resist the apparently inevitable push for escalation. If Rieff is disgusted by the ongoing Libyan war, he should also question his assumption that it would have been the wrong thing to stay

out of Libya’s civil war entirely. When we started hearing the first calls for a no-fly zone, I was one of many [observing](#) ^[5] that these “simple” solutions had a way of getting out of control:

No-fly zones are the sort of easy-sounding response to an immediate problem that can turn into an endless policy. If the reason for the no-fly zone is to halt Gaddafi’s assault on civilians, it probably won’t be long before the no-fly zone evolves into an air war against Gaddafi’s ground forces to achieve the same end, and that might escalate into a new war for regime change.

All of this is already coming to pass much more quickly than I thought possible. If opposing the first step in that process of seemingly inevitable escalation represents “foolish consistency,” I would rather be foolish and not at war with Libya than wise and sucked into a Libyan civil war with no plan and no reason to be there.

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[2] bizarre concluding sentence: http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0311/51804_Page2.html

[3] criticizes: <http://www.tnr.com/article/against-the-current/85621/libya-iraq-muammar-qaddafi>

[4] pointed out: <http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/offensive-goals-defensive-tactics/>

[5] observing: <http://www.amconmag.com/larison/2011/02/22/the-problems-of-a-libyan-no-fly-zone/>

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