

# The American Conservative

## The Weak Justification for the Libyan War

Posted By [Daniel Larison](#) On April 4, 2011 @ 7:14 am In

The New Republic recently asked an intriguing question about the U.S. intervention in Libya: Why isn't Obama getting credit for preventing an atrocity? The answer is obvious when you think about it: because he prevented the atrocity. It's hard to get credit for avoiding a disaster when it's impossible to prove the disaster would have happened without you. ~[Michael](#)

[Grunwald](#) <sup>[1]</sup>

Another reason that Obama isn't getting much credit is that the people who accept the administration's claim still have an [enormous reservoir of trust](#) <sup>[2]</sup> in Obama that the rest of us don't have, and for the rest of us the reality that Obama plunged the U.S. into a new war makes it impossible to accept administration claims at face value. Worse still, the administration has proceeded in a way that almost seems designed to intensify public distrust and skepticism. It's even harder to get credit when the claim that the intervention prevented a major atrocity is so strained and difficult to believe. Steve Chapman [made](#) <sup>[3]</sup> the following observation over the weekend:

In his March 26 radio address, Obama said the United States acted because Gadhafi threatened "a bloodbath." Two days later, he asserted, "We knew that if we waited one more day, Benghazi — a city nearly the size of Charlotte — could suffer a massacre that would have reverberated across the region and stained the conscience of the world."

Really? Obama implied that, absent our intervention, Gadhafi might have killed nearly 700,000 people, putting it in a class with the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. White House adviser Dennis Ross was only slightly less alarmist when he reportedly cited "the real or imminent possibility that up to a 100,000 people could be massacred."

But these are outlandish scenarios that go beyond any reasonable interpretation of Gadhafi's words.

Like [Benjamin Friedman](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, Chapman bothered to pay attention to Gaddafi's words and noticed that they were directed at armed rebels, rather than the civilian population in rebel-controlled areas. Chapman noted:

He said, "We will have no mercy on them" — but by "them," he plainly was referring to armed rebels ("traitors") who stand and fight, not all the city's inhabitants.

"We have left the way open to them," he said. "Escape. Let those who escape go forever." He pledged that "whoever hands over his weapons, stays at home without any weapons, whatever he did previously, he will be pardoned, protected."

Chapman turns to Alan Kuperman and Paul Miller to support his appropriate skepticism. First, Kuperman:

The rebels, however, knew that inflating their peril was their best hope for getting outside help. So, Kuperman says, they concocted the specter of genocide — and Obama believed it, or at least used it to justify intervention.

Miller also finds the administration's disaster scenario implausible:

When I contacted Miller, he discounted the talk of vast slaughter. "Benghazi is the second-largest city in the country, and he needs the city and its people to continue functioning and producing goods for his impoverished country," he said.

Defenders of Obama's decision might say that it is better to be safe than sorry, but this is not a justification for intervention on the basis of the "responsibility to protect." The "responsibility to protect" doctrine is a doctrine that effectively eliminates the protections of state sovereignty under certain circumstances, and for that reason the vast majority of internal conflicts can't and shouldn't qualify for it. Despite what some people may be saying now, it was not intended as justification for preventive war, but represented a formal international consensus that there could be extraordinary cases where evidence of systematic crimes carried out by a state or with a state's acquiescence merited outside intervention. As Miller wrote earlier:

Qaddafi has certainly committed crimes against humanity in this brief war, but R2P was designed to stop widespread, systematic, sustained, orchestrated crimes. If Qaddafi's barbarity meets that threshold, the administration hasn't made the case yet, and I'm not convinced.

The argument for the Libyan war rests *entirely* on the claim that it prevented large-scale loss of life in Benghazi, and this claim looks very shaky. This is not just politically inconvenient. The shakiness of the administration's primary reason for intervening undermines the overall legitimacy of what it and allied governments are doing in Libya. If saving civilian lives was the true goal all along, a policy that prolongs the Libyan civil war that continues to take civilian lives in Libya is the definition of a failed intervention. The longer that the civil war drags on, there is a greater danger of a large-scale loss of life *as a result of the intervention*. Instead of preventing a disaster, the Libyan war may very well be creating one before our eyes.

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URLs in this post:

[1] Michael Grunwald: <http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,2063033,00.html>

[2] enormous reservoir of trust: <http://motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2011/03/obamas-judgment>

[3] made: [http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2011/04/03/obamas\\_bloodbath\\_can\\_we\\_believe\\_the\\_hype\\_109429.html](http://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2011/04/03/obamas_bloodbath_can_we_believe_the_hype_109429.html)

[4] Benjamin Friedman: <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/three-phoney-reasons-bomb-libya-5073>

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