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## The Case for Bombing Libya Crumbles

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|  
May 27, 2011

[Benjamin H. Friedman](#)<sup>[2]</sup>

The defense authorization [bill](#)<sup>[3]</sup> that the House passed Thursday empowers presidents to make war on whomever they deem to be “associated” with al Qaeda or the Taliban. But the House’s eagerness to authorize military action does not extend to the war-like [thing](#)<sup>[4]</sup> we have going in Libya. Congress prefers to punt. The Senate [may](#)<sup>[5]</sup> vote on it next month. The House [amended](#)<sup>[6]</sup> the defense authorization bill to state that it does not authorize the use of force in Libya. They then passed another [amendment](#)<sup>[7]</sup> forbidding the President from committing ground troops there. That’s neither coherent nor [surprising](#)<sup>[8]</sup>.

Congress may not manage to dodge its war powers all year, however. Budget gurus say the Pentagon may have to ask for supplemental funds for Libya sometime this fiscal year. That might force examination of the flimsy rationales the White House offers for the war, hopefully speeding our exit.

I attacked some of those rationales in [previous](#)<sup>[9]</sup> [posts](#)<sup>[10]</sup> and a [presentation](#)<sup>[11]</sup> made two weeks on Capitol Hill. Rather than repeat myself here, I explain how recent events have further undermined the administration’s two main arguments for war.

In his [speech](#)<sup>[12]</sup> before the British parliament this week, the President continued to insist that the United States and its European allies averted a massacre in Benghazi by preventing Libyan forces from taking it in March and carrying out Qaddafi’s threats to slaughter Libyan civilians. The administration [says](#)<sup>[13]</sup> we are fighting a humanitarian war there. But Qaddafi’s rants [actually](#)<sup>[14]</sup> threatened rebel fighters, not civilians. More importantly, if Qaddafi intended to massacre civilians, his forces by now [could](#)<sup>[15]</sup> have done it. While they have used force indiscriminately, they have not tried wholesale slaughter.

There’s a larger problem with the notion that we serve humanitarian ends in Libya. Predictably, our intervention has prolonged a civil war. Probably the most effective killer of civilians in the modern world is civil war, due to direct violence and the collapse of government, sanitation, and health services. We would likely have saved more lives by letting Qaddafi win. That does not mean that making or aiding revolutions is wrong. The point is instead that in Libya we are pursuing liberal democracy at the expense of humanitarianism. Those ends rarely recommend

the same policy.

In London, the president did skip one of his administration's favorite rationales for the war, perhaps because events have so debased it. That is credibility to stand up for protesters elsewhere in the region. The administration has repeatedly said that by fighting in Libya we would show despots elsewhere in the region that the international community would not allow them to repress democratic movements.

I argued <sup>[9]</sup> that credibility does not travel so easily; that despots looking to prevent unrest and stay in power assess outsiders' proclivity to intervene based on their interests and ability to act. And if credibility did travel as easily as the president claims, it would have militated against intervention in Libya. It ties up western forces, expends public patience for war, demonstrates our limited will to fight for ideals, and suggests that crushing protests before they turn to revolt can limit outsiders' eagerness to intervene.

The violence <sup>[16]</sup> directed <sup>[17]</sup> against <sup>[18]</sup> civilians across Libya since our adventure began suggests that it has not taught dictators the lessons we meant for them.

The main reason we went to war in Libya was that US leaders mistakenly thought they could install a liberal democracy and overthrow a particularly noxious dictator on the cheap. The president argues that we are standing up for freedom in Libya. Leaving aside the abandonment of the old American view that we should vocally support liberation movements abroad but not go to war for them, the trouble here is that Libya lacks most prerequisites <sup>[19]</sup> that predict successful transition to stable liberalism, and outside powers lack <sup>[20]</sup> the ability to install such governments. The more likely result of Qaddafi's ouster is prolonged instability. Hopefully I'm wrong.

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