

The Logic of Deliberate Mission Creep

John Glaser, May 24, 2011

[Email This](#) | [Print This](#) | [Share This](#) | [Comment](#) | [Antiwar Forum](#)

Word that the Libyan war is illegal has been out for some time now. Here's just a sampling:

[Daniel Larison](#): As far as U.S. law is concerned, this is also wrong. The President has no authority under the Constitution to do what Obama has done in Libya.

[Doug Bandow](#): President Obama took the country into war against Libya without a declaration of war. He continues to bombard Libya contrary to the War Powers Resolution. He has compounded one of America's stupidest wars by making it indisputably illegal.

[Glenn Greenwald](#): This war, without Congressional authorization, is illegal in every relevant sense: Constitutionally and statutorily. That was true from its start but is especially true now.

[Gene Healy](#): On Friday the 60-day clock ran out, leaving Obama in clear violation of the War Powers Resolution, passed in 1973 to "fulfill the intent of the framers of the Constitution ... [and] insure that the collective judgment of both the Congress and the President will apply to the introduction of United States Armed Forces into hostilities." Instead of withdrawing U.S. forces, the president sent a letter to congressional leaders insisting — bizarrely — that drone attacks and "suppression and destruction of air defenses" don't qualify as "hostilities" under the resolution.

All of this, while it is being [reported today](#) that NATO is "stepping up" the bombardment of Libya, striking "Col. Gadhafi's residential compound" in "what appeared to be the heaviest night of bombing of the Libyan capital since the alliance launched its air campaign." To add to this: "the U.S. invited Libya's rebel leadership on Tuesday to open a representative office in Washington D.C. and NATO moved towards considering adding ground-attack helicopters to its military campaign in hopes of breaking a stalemate between the Libyan leader and rebels seeking to overthrow him."

One of the strategies consistently employed by U.S. presidents to extend illegal wars is to change the stated mission. This is exactly what has happened with Libya. Hostilities were initiated on the basis of protecting civilians and were revamped almost immediately to include supporting rebel groups and now the mission aims explicitly to overthrow Gaddafi. What gives the U.S. or NATO the prerogative to do such a thing is a mystery.

But we saw similar mission creep in Afghanistan. Initially the invasion was about grabbing bin Laden and whatever elements of al Qaeda we could. It quickly turned into a war against the Taliban for not handing al Qaeda over to the U.S. Shortly thereafter, the war was on the country of Afghanistan, as the U.S. warned the bombing would not stop until Afghans changed their leadership (this happens to be no different from what bin Laden did on September 11th). After that, the Taliban had fallen, and the mission

5/24/2011

The Logic of Deliberate Mission Creep ...

turned into creating a proxy “democratic” government in Afghanistan to be allied with the U.S. Years passed, and now it seems the mission is quelling a violent insurgency and training Afghan forces, with possibilities for a power-sharing agreement with the Taliban. Hence forever war.

Similar war aim trajectories can be found with Iraq, et al. It is a very common tactic to keep wars going. If the stated war aim is seemingly unlimited to begin with, it's less likely to get substantial support from the American people. If it is limited at first, but then constantly changes to increasingly aggressive and grandiose aims, passive and indoctrinated acceptance by the electorate is more likely. Plus, ascertaining the legality of the venture will become simply bewildering, and thus a fleeting obje