

## Should America 'Liberate' Libya?

Posted By [Malou Innocent](#) On March 1, 2011 @ 1:36 pm In [Foreign Policy and National Security, General](#) | [Comments Disabled](#)

In 2008, the election of President Barack Obama was widely touted as a repudiation of President George W. Bush's messianic vision that "Our common prosperity will be advanced by allowing all humanity—men and women—to reach their full potential." In the years following America's failed democratic experiment in Iraq, many Americans began to spurn the Bush era's presumptuous conviction that "We have the power to make the world we seek." Liberals in particular roundly rejected the supposed "unyielding belief" that America is called to lead the cause of "rule of law" and "the equal administration of justice" around the world. Such pious declarations are in keeping with Bush's neo-Wilsonian foreign policy. Does it surprise you then, that all of the quotes above were made by President Obama in his June 2009 [speech](#) <sup>[1]</sup> at Cairo University?

Americans who favor establishing a no-fly zone over Libya hope that such an effort will save lives. What Americans have not learned is exactly what transgressions warrant the use of American force. The primary constitutional function of the U.S. Government is to defend against threats to the national interest. However, because the definition of "interest" has expanded by leaps and bounds, the United States now combats an exhausting proliferation of "threats" even in the absence of discernable enemies. Hence, the proposal of a no-fly zone over Libya is merely the latest iteration of a long-standing grand strategy that implicitly endorses an interventionist foreign policy.

Despite the fact that humanitarian assistance to Libya remains, in principle, morally defensible, the primary question is whether military action is best suited to such a task. As Christopher Coyne, Assistant Professor of Economics at West Virginia University [argues](#) <sup>[2]</sup>, its the "Nirvana Fallacy."

The Nirvana Fallacy is the false assumption that in the face of weak, failed or illiberal governments, external occupiers can provide a better outcome than what would exist in the absence of those efforts. But what authority does President Obama have to embark upon a mission to change the very structure of societies on the other side of the earth?

As a libertarian, I believe that intangible variables such as values, traditions, and belief systems, go beyond a U.S. policymaker's ability—and *jurisdiction*—to control. Yet with worldwide attention now on Libya, it seems that once again the extension of freedom abroad is being subsumed under the mantle of America's legitimate self-defense. Don't believe the hype.

As George Kennan, American diplomat and "father of Cold War containment" strategy once [said](#) <sup>[3]</sup>:

"Anyone who has ever studied the history of American diplomacy, especially military diplomacy, knows that you might start in a war with certain things on your mind as a purpose of what you are doing, but in the end, you found yourself fighting for entirely different things that you had never thought of before...In other words, war has a momentum of its own and it carries you away from all thoughtful intentions when you get into it."

Kennan continues: "Today, if we went into Iraq, like the president would like us to do, you know where you begin. You never know where you are going to end."

Now imagine if a politician wanted to build a bridge and said "I don't know how much it will cost. I don't know how many engineers I need. I don't know how long it will take. And I don't know whether it'll even get built or stay up if it is. But give me the money and I'll build the bridge anyway." Yet this is exactly what we do when it comes to intervention. Never mind how long a no-fly zone will last, how many soldiers we would commit, or how whether it may precipitate a ground invasion and possibly regime change. We apply more stringent criteria to domestic policy than to proposals to pacify a foreign population.

Like most Americans, I too have a natural desire to see human suffering alleviated. And so the United States can and should support people's power and other anti-government movements when possible. But Americans have become confused over what "support" really means. [Not backing dictators with billions of dollars](#) <sup>[4]</sup> would be a start. Another would be, when feasible, resorting to economic sanctions, though they have a poor track record. But we have come to rely too heavily—almost as an option of first resort—of relying on military intervention. Luckily, the shockwave of mass protests sweeping through the Middle East finally gives America the opportunity to support freedom in the Middle East in a *non-military* way. Accordingly, a foreign-led effort to liberate Libya will implicitly deprive local people of their ability to deal with this political conflict on their own. As British philosopher John Stuart Mill writes in his classic text "[A Few Words on Nonintervention](#)," <sup>[5]</sup> the subjects of an oppressive ruler must achieve freedom for themselves:

The only test possessing any real value, of a people's having become fit for popular institutions is that they, or a sufficient portion of them to prevail in the contest, are willing to brave labour and danger for their liberation.

...

But the evil is, that if they have not sufficient love of liberty to be able to wrest it from merely domestic oppressors, the liberty which is bestowed on them by other hands than their own, will have nothing real, nothing permanent.

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[1] speech: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html>

[2] argues: <http://www.amazon.com/After-War-Political-Exporting-Democracy/dp/0804754403>

[3] said: <http://hnn.us/articles/997.html>

[4] Not backing dictators with billions of dollars: [http://www.cato.org/pub\\_display.php?pub\\_id=12759](http://www.cato.org/pub_display.php?pub_id=12759)

[5] "A Few Words on Nonintervention,": [http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com\\_staticxt&staticfile=show.php&title=255&search=%22A+Few+Words+On+Non-intervention%22&chapter=21666&layout=html#a\\_809352](http://oll.libertyfund.org/index.php?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php&title=255&search=%22A+Few+Words+On+Non-intervention%22&chapter=21666&layout=html#a_809352)

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