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Interests and Values Are Different

| [More](#)^[1]

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[Justin Logan](#)^[2]

Via ^[3] Nuno Monteiro, Anne-Marie Slaughter has an [essay in the *New York Review of Books*](#)^[4] attempting to dissolve the distinction between “interests” and “values” in foreign-policy debates.

Nuno’s post is too polite. Slaughter’s essay obscures more than it reveals.

The main points of Slaughter’s article are to defend President Obama’s insistence that his critics are posing “false choices” in terms of foreign policy, and, *sotto voce*, to defend President Bush’s insistence that “our interests and our values are now one.” Neither is true. Before getting to that, though, one syntactic idiosyncrasy bears examination.

Slaughter uses a similar rhetorical sleight of hand that the president and his advisers used in making the case for the war: namely, implying that tens of thousands of *civilians*—not fighters in Libya’s civil war—would have been killed had we not intervened. Dennis Ross alluded to “[the real or imminent possibility that up to a 100,000 people could be massacred, and everyone would blame us for it](#)”^[5]. Slaughter uses murkier language, suggesting there might have been a “house-to-house massacre of all opposition *supporters* in Benghazi, a city of 700,000.” (emphasis added) How were Qaddafi’s forces going to discern who had “supported” the opposition? I have a guess.

Oddly, though, in [his speech to the nation](#)^[6], President Obama suggested 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.” (emphasis mine) It’s tough to tell what the president meant by this, but other observers were clearer. [As Ryan Crocker put it](#)^[7], the prospect was that “if the no-fly zone had waited one more day, *Gadhafi’s forces would have taken Benghazi*.” (emphasis mine) That is, Qaddafi would have *won the Libyan civil war*, not engaged in house-to-house killing of people who believed in liberalism. If Qaddafi was poised to win within a day, it is very tough to imagine that in doing so he would have killed 100,000 civilians.

For their part, Slaughter/Obama insist that while protecting civilians in Libya does not constitute a “core interest,” it does pose a “challenge to our common security and common humanity.” (Are

“common security” and “common humanity” “interests”?)

Beyond humanitarianism, they gesture at more traditional-style interests and judge that even on traditional grounds, the war passes muster. There were dangerous prospects for:

- 1) “floods of refugees” into Egypt and Tunisia;
- 2) “the message that would be sent to other dictators in the region”; and
- 3) “the erosion of all credibility for the UN Security Council.”

But on more traditional grounds, these are very weak interests. If there were really a prospect of dangerously destabilizing floods of refugees into Egypt and Tunisia, the Egyptian air force could have established a no fly zone. As for messages to other dictators and “credibility” arguments, see [Ben Friedman](#) [8].

Slaughter finds herself perplexed that “any effort to argue for intervention in circumstances where the protection of lives and rights are involved almost immediately gets framed as values versus interests, no matter how hard the advocate of intervention insists that it is interests versus interests.”

What Slaughter should have said is that while interests are not values, and while they do not always point in the same direction, it may be the case that a state feels strong moral compunction about something without having any powerful interests at stake. That, in my view, is what we have here, and it would be a much more reasonable argument. Think of it as a two-by-two:

	strong interests	weak interests
strong values	WWII (generally)	Libya today?
weak values	?*	Falklands?

Instead of thinking in this way, Slaughter offers a Rube Goldberg-style conception of interests that necessitates intervention. Let me once again quote [Barry Posen](#) [9]:

the United States should be willing to assist in humanitarian interventions, but under reasonable guidelines. The most important guideline is to avoid overselling the prospective results to the American people. **When the United States is about to engage in armed philanthropy, it should not disguise the effort as the pursuit of a security interest. If the latter is required to sell the policy, then the policy is already in trouble.** Once characterized as a security interest, the U.S. Congress and the public expect that the United States will lead the fight; that decisive military means will be employed; and that victory will be achieved—all of which raises U.S. military and political costs... (emphasis mine)

There are other problems with Slaughter’s essay, but that is the central one. Misleading people—including ourselves—about what constitute “interests” is not the basis for a prudent and well-calibrated foreign-policy.

* It is particularly hard to think of two powerful, important countries (strong interests) that both were fighting each other on behalf of Goodness and Light (weak values). One could probably make the argument that on the Eastern Front in World War II, two powerful regimes both of which were characterized by Evil and Darkness were fighting each other, so our values only would have guided us to ensure that neither side won. That is, were Nazi Germany and Stalin's Russia to have bled each other white, one could speculate that that outcome may have served our values (and our interests) best. For a provocative explication of this argument, try [this](#) ^[10].

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[4] <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2011/mar/30/interests-values-obamas-libya-strategy>

[5] http://news.yahoo.com/s/yblog_theenvoy/20110323/ts_yblog_theenvoy/averting-srebrenica-on-steroids-white-house-defends-libya-operations

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