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Barack Obama's Trouble with Adjectives (and Nouns)

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|
March 2, 2011

[Justin Logan](#) ^[2]

[Last Friday](#) ^[3], President Obama issued an Executive Order declaring a “national emergency” because of the slaughter in Libya. In the [Executive Order](#) ^[4] and the [accompanying letter to congress](#) ^[5], Obama wrote that the overall situation constituted

...an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security and foreign policy of the United States.

Obama should be ashamed at this language. Muammar Qadhafi is a despicable man without basic decency, but this fuzzy rhetoric is wrong and possibly harmful. Not just a “threat” to U.S. national security, but an “extraordinary” threat? What would constitute a trivial threat or a non-threat, then? And what is the rhetorical purpose of adding the clause “and foreign policy” to the sentence? To fuse the argument about national security threat to one claiming that Muammar Qadhafi’s slaughter of his own citizens might influence our foreign-policy decisions, it seems. But writing in that way leads a casual observer to believe that the president is emphasizing what he believes to be a threat to U.S. national security posed by Libya, which does the English language a disservice. For some reason the phrase “[giving the appearance of solidity to pure wind](#)” ^[6] is coming to mind.

I understand that [the same clique of neoconservatives and New Republic people and other liberal imperialists who got us into the Iraq war](#) ^[7] are urging Obama to act and salivating at the prospect of accusing him of being “weak,” but even they did not use the sort of hyperbolic rhetoric that Obama did in his Executive Order and letter to congress.

In [an excellent 2007 essay](#) ^[8], Barry Posen warned against the peculiar American tendency to cast everything one wants to do in foreign policy as a grave threat. As Posen wrote,

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. Instead, the United States should only engage in armed philanthropy in coalitions, operating under some kind of regional or international political mandate. The United States should not insist on leadership; indeed, it should avoid it whenever possible. On the whole, too, the United States should offer logistical rather than direct combat assets. (emphasis mine)

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Barack Obama's Trouble with Adjective...

At some point American foreign policymakers are going to learn to speak and think honestly and clearly. We are not at that point yet.

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