

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

The Golden Rule of Foreign Policy

Doug Bandow | August 15, 2012

The crescendo for action in Syria continues to grow. From Left to Right, from pundit to politician, the cry is “Do something!”

No surprise, the U.S. Senate’s so-called “Three Amigos,” Senators John McCain (R-AZ), Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and Joseph Lieberman (I-CT), long have been calling for war. But then, there are few countries in which they do not want to go to war.

Nicholas Kristof of the *New York Times* recently penned a column entitled “Obama AWOL in Syria.” [4] He didn’t urge an invasion—not yet, anyway—but wanted to aid the rebels. And he cited a variety of people pushing more active military involvement, such as a no-fly, no-drive zone.

Naturally, Kristof didn’t spend much time on the risk [5] of things turning out badly [6]. He might have asked Madeleine Albright, whom he quoted in favor of intervention, about the havoc wreaked by the ethnic Albanians in Kosovo after the administration she served lent them America’s air force. But she probably didn’t notice.

Kristof does have an idea on how to limit any ill consequences. He cited Anne-Marie Slaughter’s proposal [7] for military intervention on behalf of rebels who behave nicely. “Some Free Syrian Army commanders have signed such a code of conduct,” he enthused.

At least Kristof opposed the Iraq invasion. Most members of the perpetual-war party exhibit no shame. They just glide past the wreckage of their earlier military crusades and beat the war drums again. For some, war is the ultimate panacea. For instance, Sen. McCain has proposed attacking North Korea and Iran. He wanted to confront Russia when it battled Georgia. He advocated war forever in Iraq and Afghanistan, if necessary. And, of course, he wants action in Syria.

Perhaps even more striking is *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson, who criticized the president for his “risky, do-nothing doctrine.” [8] The Afghans are afraid the United States is leaving (of course, only after *eleven years* of costly nation building). The administration isn’t prepared for confrontation with Iran

(even though U.S. intelligence agencies find no evidence of an active weapons program, which would seem to be necessary to conceivably justify war). And President Obama is doing nothing in Syria, where the “civil war is approaching genocide” (it’s a nasty conflict, but genocide it most certainly isn’t, and a lot of conflicts have been far worse).

This argument seems particularly disconnected coming from someone who worked for George W. Bush, whose presidency was defined by the Iraq war. We were promised cakewalks, freedom on the march and pro-American democracy. Instead, the result was a ravaged society, a tidal wave of crime and violence, and bitter guerrilla conflict and even more brutal sectarian war. Casualty estimates vary wildly, but a couple hundred thousand Iraqi civilians likely died. The historic Christian community was destroyed [9]. Millions of people were forced from their homes. Add to all that the slow authoritarian [10] and pro-Iranian drift [11].

People who helped generate such horror should take a deep breath before demanding that Washington again let loose the dogs of war.

Doctors long ago taught us that the first duty of those who would help is to do no harm. That should be the first plank of any foreign policy as well.