

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Washington's Endless War

Doug Bandow | October 23, 2012

America's natural condition once was peace. Although war sometimes was believed to be necessary, it nevertheless was seen as exceptional. Other than continuous but irregular combat with Native Americans, the United States was rarely at war as the nation expanded.

Today, Americans are constantly in battle. And not just in one war. Policy makers no longer feel much restraint on sending young Americans into combat.

The Obama administration intervened in Libya's civil war, which in no way threatened American security. U.S. forces have been fighting for eleven years in Afghanistan. American troops spent seven years occupying Iraq, most of that time targeted by a bitter insurgency. Washington occupied Bosnia and Kosovo after meddling in Balkans conflicts relevant to Europe, and now the United States. U.S. Special Forces are involved all over the globe, from Uganda to the Philippines to Latin America.

All this might be only the beginning. President Barack Obama's policies are as warlike as those of his predecessor. Yet Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney is seeking to portray the president as a Jimmy Carter-style weakling. Romney appears to be simultaneously channeling George W. Bush and John McCain.

Proposals for new wars are not limited to those intended to defend America or stop genocide. A clamor now arises to join most any conflict, anywhere, of any size. In Libya, there were no direct massacres of civilians. Rather, most civilian casualties resulted from the low-tech civil war, which allied intervention actually extended. Syria's civil war is similarly ugly, but there has been no genocide.

Find an overseas conflict, and someone is advocating U.S. intervention. For instance, *Washington Post* columnist Michael Gerson recently complained that the United States was not currently involved in Syria, committed to permanent war in Afghanistan and prepared for conflict with Iran.

Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham and Joseph Lieberman are leading the charge in Syria. The "three amigos," who campaigned for the war in Iraq, never see the dangers of intervention, but always perceive risks of inaction. They recently worried that in Syria, "this reluctance to lead will, we fear—like our failure

to stop the slaughter of the Kurds and Shiites under Saddam Hussein in Iraq or of the Tutsis in Rwanda—haunt our nation for years to come.” The three want to arm the rebels and “reinforce” rebel-held territories through airpower and “other unique U.S. assets.”

McCain recently called the refusal to put young Americans at risk in someone else’s fratricidal conflict “shameful.” He [added](#), “the most responsible course first is for the president to stand up and speak for these people.” As opposed to representing the American people?

The three amigos are not alone. Writing on behalf of the group Freedom House, Charles Dunne, David J. Kramer and William H. Taft contend that “the United States must summon its leadership skills and, as it did in Libya, put an end to a disastrous conflict in Syria that challenges our sense of ourselves as Americans as well as our national interests.” Translation: Washington elites should summon the military to fight yet another unnecessary war as likely to begin a new conflict as end an old one.

Canadian senator Hugh Segal chimed in:

The Syrian military will have little to fear until NATO and the Arab League declare and enforce a no-fly zone to keep Syrian helicopters from attacking their own civilian population. Until NATO ships with sea-to-shore missile capacity and helicopter forces patrol off the Syrian coast, and until Syrian command-and-control systems and centers are neutralized, the Syrian army will have no reason to demur from orders that are war crimes.

Not that his own nation’s small military is up to the job. He would conscript the American armed forces, complaining that “allowing the Syrian violence to continue says to all authoritarian and rogue governments that U.S. presidential election years are good times to mow down your own people.”

The liberal *Washington Post* demonstrated that there is little difference between Right and Left when it criticized the Obama administration for “refusing to step in.” Liberal *New York Times* columnist Nicholas D. Kristof made much the same argument, [contending](#) that “Syria, like Libya, is a rare case where we can take modest steps that stand a good chance of accelerating the fall of a dictator. And after 17 months, there’s growing agreement that Obama should no longer remain a bystander.” Or, more accurately, U.S. military personnel should not remain safe as bystanders.

Some observers don’t believe it would be enough to oust Syrian president Bashar Assad. Bruce Riedel, a former CIA analyst, [contended](#) that “one of the priorities of the international community after Assad falls will be to protect the Alawite community and its allies from vengeance.” In short, Washington should

go to war to force out Assad, putting his political allies at risk, and then if necessary go to war to protect them.

Iran also is on almost every uberhawk's "must-war" list. American officials routinely threaten to attack Tehran. Mitt Romney criticized the president for not being sufficiently subservient to Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who wants Washington to attack Iran.

McCain has pushed for war against Iran for years. Four years ago he famously sang "Bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb, bomb Iran" to the tune of the Beach Boys' "Barbara Ann." Last month he termed the administration's policy a "train wreck"—because it was insufficiently threatening. Lieberman joined in, arguing that the "red line" for military action should be weapons capability, not weapons development.

McCain also apparently desired more war in Iraq. He declared that, as president, he would have left twenty thousand troops there, even though Baghdad ordered them home under the agreement negotiated with the Bush administration. "Things are unraveling" and could yield a "fractured state," warned McCain. Exactly what the U.S. military could do to unify Iraq is not clear, but any remaining forces presumably would have had to be ready for combat. No conflict is too big or too small for the senator to support.

Another potential target is Mali, which suffers from a rebellion fomented by Islamist rebels who fled Libya after Western intervention in the latter. The International Crisis Group recently concluded that "the use of military force will probably be necessary to neutralize transnational armed groups that indulge in terrorism, jihadism and drug and arms trafficking and to restore Mali's territorial integrity." Exactly how any of these threaten America is not clear. Yet the *Washington Post* also [called](#) for war: "the United States should support an effort to launch a similar intervention [to that in Liberia] of U.N. and regional forces in Mali as soon as possible."

The African Union requested the United Nations to bless military intervention in Mali, which has requested outside aid. An anonymous European official has predicted UN Security Council approval for a Western-backed military force of some kind. "There is real urgency there," he told the *Washington Post*. A similarly anonymous American official told the *Post* that problems in Mali "must be dealt with through security and military means." State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said the administration expects African nations to be "very much in the lead" but "is prepared to support a well-thought-out plan."

However, with U.S. Special Forces active throughout northern Africa and the death of three such personnel in a car accident in Mali earlier this year, Americans already appear to be involved there. Indeed, Michael Sheehan, the assistant secretary of defense for special operations, [said](#): "What we will do with

Mali, I can't speculate, but I think you can look at the whole range of things that have been successful in partnership with (other) governments, and perhaps operating in ungoverned space."

Finally, advocates of routine, militarized humanitarianism are on the rise. Eric Reeves of Smith College argued in August that Sudan again won the title of "world's greatest humanitarian crisis." He naturally argued for military action: "the UN 'responsibility to protect' is a doctrine that has been widely touted by a range of international actors; now is the time to see whether doctrine and reality have anything to do with one another."

Then there is everywhere else. As Nick Turse of TomDispatch [points out](#), "U.S. military personnel now take part in near-constant joint exercises and training missions around the world aimed at fostering alliances, building coalitions, and whipping surrogate forces into shape to support U.S. national security objectives." Overall, some sixty thousand personnel are under the U.S. Special Operations Command, which enables Washington to meddle in quite a few wars.

There is no better evidence that America has gone from republic to empire than the fact that the United States is rarely at peace. War sometimes is unavoidable. But it should truly be necessary, a matter of vital rather than peripheral interests. Moreover, loosing the dogs of war always should be a last resort, not just another option. It certainly should not become the preferred means of launching moral crusades with someone else's lives and wealth.

Mitt Romney is right that foreign policy should be a big issue in the presidential campaign. If it were, however, people would have cause to vote against *both* major party nominees, since both are far too willing to initiate war for interests which are not even important, let alone vital.