

# White House: 'No mercy' is not a doctrine



President [Barack Obama](#) delivers his address at the [National Defense University](#) in Washington, Monday, March 28, 2011, to give an update on [Libya](#). (AP Photo/[Manuel Balce Ceneta](#))

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Don't call it a doctrine.

As President Obama addressed the country Monday to explain his decision 10 days ago to attack Libya, the White House insisted there are no broader axioms to draw from it, and his top advisers said it is not a precedent for what he might do in Syria, Sudan or other situations.

But some conditions that made Libya ripe for action have become clear: a big enough international consensus, a seemingly easy-enough mission and, most important, Libyan

ruler Col. Moammar Gadhafi's threat to show "no mercy" when his forces encountered rebels.

In fact, "no mercy" has been the buzzword out of the White House for more than a week, with Mr Obama using it in every extended public appearance over the past several days and his advisers saying it justified the need to act even before there had been a full congressional debate.

What that means for U.S. policy going forward, however, is less clear.

"That can't possibly be the standard because, if it is, if that's really the standard, then our overstretched military hasn't even begun to see the limits of where else it could go," said Christopher A. Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.

Presidential doctrines are the stuff of history. Among the more prominent are the Monroe Doctrine that objected to further European colonization in the Western Hemisphere, the Truman Doctrine laying out U.S. assistance to countries resisting Soviet influence and, more recently, the Bush Doctrine that the U.S. would use pre-emptive military force to try to prevent a future attack by another country.

But the Obama administration has shied away from saying there's a doctrine involved in the president's decision to attack Libya.

"We don't make decisions about questions like intervention based on consistency or precedent. We make them based on how we can best advance our interests in the region," Deputy National Security Adviser Denis McDonough told reporters at the White House on Monday.

With other regional hot spots such as Syria, Bahrain, Yemen and Sudan, the White House has been peppered with questions about how to apply the lessons of Libya.

Mr. McDonough, though, said each situation is unique, and laid out the factors that convinced Mr. Obama that this was an appropriate time and place to deploy U.S. forces. Key among those was the "no mercy" statement by Col. Gadhafi.

"I could spell out each of the Libya examples which makes it unique: The fact that we had very unsettling and inciting language from the government, to include that he would use no mercy, or that he would go door to door and find people in their closets; his history, threatening the king of Saudi Arabia; being behind an attack on American citizens, as has been very well spelled out in [shot-down] Pan Am [Flight] 103; the fact that we had indications of the planning around the use of such violence against individuals," Mr. McDonough said.

Michael E. O'Hanlon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said he would add another standard to the administration's thinking: the need to prevent the gains in other Arab countries this spring from turning into a massacre.

"Fair enough, and wise enough, as far as it goes," he said. "But, of course, the hard question may now be: What do we do in the event of a military stalemate? Do we escalate in some way or not? What would the doctrine say about that? I don't think we know yet."

Mr. Preble said it's not fair to try to divine an Obama doctrine from the disparate statements the administration has used to justify its action in Libya, but added that Mr. Obama should realize that the U.S. role can often balloon beyond what a president first says.

"Of all the people who should understand the limits of military power here, it should be Barack Obama," he said. "Barack Obama famously warned, correctly, in October of 2002 that there was no exit strategy in Iraq at a time when most people just were not there. He was way ahead of public opinion there."

Doctrine or not, the president's intervention won praise from Sam Bell, executive director of the Genocide Intervention Network/Save Darfur Coalition, who said Mr. Obama's decision "did this country very, very proud."

Mr. Bell rejected the arguments of those who say the U.S. is getting involved in a civil war and that sets a precedent for other civil wars.

"What's important to recognize is atrocities often happen in the context of a civil war, but not all civil wars lead to atrocities," he said. "From our perspective, the fact that a civil war is going on does not get the government off the hook to prevent atrocities so, from that score, we're really impressed by the speech and the robust response by the Obama administration."

He also predicted that when the administration has more time to explain its actions, public support will increase, and he said that could bolster support for more action in the future to protect those facing humanitarian crises.

While the White House rejected any precedent, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said he sees one in Security Council Resolution 1973 authorizing international action to establish the no-fly zone, which he said represents an "emerging humanitarian doctrine: the responsibility to protect."

"This doctrine grew in turn out of the terrible massacres of the previous decade, in which the international community had been accused of doing nothing. Those massacres included the genocides in Srebrenica, Rwanda and even Cambodia," he said. "After those terrible incidents, the world said, 'Never again.' "

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