



Clinton's Failure in Libya is About Much More Than Her Casualty Count

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If Hillary Clinton had sat down with a focus group to determine the worst possible thing to say about America's 2011 Libyan misadventure, a remark she made at a town hall event in Illinois last week might just be what our hypothetical group would devise.

Speaking with MSNBC's Chris Matthews, Clinton doubled down on her longstanding argument that her pet intervention was, if not an outright success, at least not the failure many have persuasively argued it to be. After all, she said, "we didn't lose a single person" in Libya—which is technically true, unless you remember the 2012 attack on the American diplomatic complex in Benghazi, which left four Americans dead.

Clinton's callous comment summons all too easily to mind her infamously dismissive language at a 2013 congressional inquiry into the Benghazi incident. Why did the attack happen? Well, a visibly exasperated Clinton exclaimed, "What difference, at this point, does it make?"

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Now as then, her cavalier language makes for a click-worthy headline—and so it should. But unfortunately, Clinton's careless words about Benghazi are just the icing on the cake of her failures in Libya. The wrongness of last Monday's boast is hardly the only place she goes wrong in her rosy rewrite of recent Libyan history, as the rest of her town hall statement typifies.

In Illinois, as she has elsewhere, Clinton made three key arguments, each more fallacious than the last.

First she contrasted her push to bomb Libya with her push to invade Iraq in 2003.

“Libya was a different kind of calculation,” she said, with no combat casualties for America and the cooperation of “our European and Arab allies in working with NATO.”

The problem, of course, is that switching from ground to air campaign and getting France on board does not a successful intervention make—as the aftermath of Libya has amply demonstrated. As the Cato Institute’s Christopher Preble argued at Politico Wednesday, “an honest accounting of the 2011 bombing campaign reveals it as yet another foolish adventure in the Middle East,” with more aftermath similarities to Iraq than Clinton’s superficial assessment suggests.

That brings me to Clinton’s second argument, her misleading account of Libya’s present state.

“Now, is Libya perfect?” she began. “It isn’t. But did they have two elections that were free and fair where they voted for moderates. Yes, they did. So you know, changing from a dictator who has hollowed out your country to something resembling a functioning state and even hopefully more of a democratic one doesn’t happen overnight.”

On the face of it, there is little to quibble with here. Libya did indeed have elections. But though Clinton’s comment is the truth, it is far from the *whole* truth.

Much like the Iraq war, the 2011 escapade in Libya ultimately failed in its quest for stability and democracy. Indeed, in Preble’s words, “It is difficult to imagine how Libya could possibly be in worse shape today had NATO chosen bargaining over bombs to deal with [Muammar] Gadhafi,” and if “Libya was doomed either way, it is difficult to see why U.S. intervention was either necessary or wise.”

Then there’s Clinton’s third point, in which she suggests more American military action can somehow be guaranteed to prevent the exact state of affairs that *already* exists in Libya.

“We’ve got to continue to support the Libyan people, to give them a chance,” she said. “Because otherwise you see what has happened in Syria, with the consequences of millions of people flooding out of Syria, with more than 250,000 people killed, with terrorist groups like ISIS taking up almost—huge blocks of territory, as big as some of the states in that area.”

What Clinton conveniently fails to mention is that the Islamic State grabbing huge blocks of territory in Libya right now. Her implication that the nation is troubled but nurturing a new birth of democracy is Pollyannaish at best and outright deceptive at worst. In fact, it is precisely the fact that Islamic State is grabbing land and power in Libya which is being used as rationale by Clinton’s fellow irresponsible hawks for the new bombing campaign she euphemistically calls “support.”

The real issue here, as Chris Matthews unsuccessfully tried to get Clinton to admit, is her seemingly constant interest in American-orchestrated regime change in the Middle East. And though the former secretary of state certainly deserves to be taken to task for her lackadaisical comments about Benghazi, to focus on that tragedy alone is to miss the forest fire for the trees.