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More Questions Raised by the Libyan Intervention

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March 21, 2011

[Christopher A. Preble](#)^[2]

[Jacob Heilbrunn](#)^[3] has, as usual, stolen my thunder today (when *does* he wake up in the morning?). And [Paul Pillar](#)^[4] and [my](#)^[5] [Cato](#)^[6] [colleagues](#)^[7]—again, as usual—beat me to the punch last week concerning the Obama administration's decision to launch military strikes against Muammar Qaddafi's forces in Libya.

I'm left to ponder—now that Florida State has destroyed my March Madness bracket—several questions raised by the ongoing military operations, in no particular order:

Is the congressional control over the war powers dead? A smart aleck might say, when was it last alive? Congress hasn't formally declared war since World War II. True enough, but one might think that an emboldened and large class of Congressional Freshmen would be as willing to challenge the Obama administration in the conduct of foreign policy as they have been in domestic matters. It is doubly curious that this same Congress that opposes the president and modern liberals on Constitutional grounds has little appreciation for what James Madison declared the document's most important passage: the Legislature's control over the war power. There have been a few voices raised in dissent, including Indiana Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN) and House members John Larson (D-CT) and Dennis Kucinich (D-OH), but these objections are notable chiefly because there have been so few. ([H/T Grover Cleveland at Pileus](#)^[8])

Does the pottery barn principle still apply? It is doubtful that Colin Powell ever actually said, "If you break it, you own it," but I have never heard Powell object to the concept that a country which engages in military operations against another country incurs some obligation to clean up after the fact. Many people now believe that to be true, not merely as it applies to Iraq and Afghanistan, but also to other U.S. operations, some of which occurred generations ago. Do we believe that Libya will be different? Is it plausible that someone else will be on the hook for cleaning up? And if the rebels who we now celebrate as heroic opponents of Qaddafi turn out to be big fans of someone else who we don't like very much, will we stand aside as that new person/group exacts revenge on one-time supporters of the regime? Will we look on impassively if they make common cause with our sworn enemies? Doubtful, on all fronts. The parallels to

Iraq are obvious.

Is the English language, or merely basic common sense, dead? Justin Logan a few weeks ago commented on [Barack Obama's problem with adjectives and nouns](#) [9], but the point bears repeating: there is an urgent need for more clarity of expression, if not actual clear thinking, as it pertains to the Libyan case. For example, I seriously doubt that the president intends to create a universal principle out of the claim that U.S. "decisions have been driven by Gaddafi's refusal to respect the rights of his people and the potential for mass murder of innocent civilians." He might believe it in this *particular* case, but that doesn't explain why the United States has not acted in a similar fashion with respect to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan/Darfur, or the Ivory Coast. And then there is the troubling question of the actions of our ally in Bahrain, aided by other allies Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, to put down a Shiite [uprising in the home of the U.S. Fifth Fleet](#) [10]. Our obvious unwillingness to stop the violence (admittedly on a much smaller scale) in Manama demonstrates that the U.S. government does not apply a common standard when it comes to protecting civilians from their own governments.

Is the Petraeus question moot? In the earliest days of the Iraq War, Gen. David Petraeus is purported to have said to the reporter traveling with him: "Tell me how this ends." The line was good enough that [Linda Robinson made it the title of her book on Petraeus](#) [11]. Notwithstanding the claims by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates and JCS Chair Adm. Mike Mullen, I do not see a clearly defined mission, and therefore one that—once achieved—would signal a point at which U.S. military operations would come to an end. The mission of protecting civilians, for example, doesn't present such a clear end point, as the threat to civilians would persist even if Qaddafi and his sons and supporters leave the scene. It could come from 1) rogue elements operating within a chaotic state; 2) a deliberate campaign by rebel forces once they take power to exact revenge (see pottery barn point above); or 3) an act of aggression by a neighboring state. At what point does the United States obligation to defend Libyan civilians come to end?

I'm going to write more on this over at Cato-@-Liberty later today, but I wanted to get my initial thoughts into electrons this morning.

More by

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