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Obama, Intervention, and the Power Problem

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Reports today indicate the United States will end its air combat role in Libya soon^[3], angering hawks on both sides of the aisle in Congress. In testimony to both houses of Congress yesterday, Secretary Gates and Admiral Mullen were berated by Congressmen asking why the United States was now pulling back at such a crucial juncture. Predictably, Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Joseph Lieberman (I-CN) are at the forefront of policymakers calling for “any means necessary” to achieve regime change in Libya^[4]. But not everyone is anxious to wade deeper into a third war. Skeptics, such as Senator Jim Webb (D-VA) questioned the very evident “mission creep”^[5] that has seen the mission transform from one of humanitarian intervention to regime change.

In his speech^[6] on U.S. action in Libya on Monday, President Obama ruled out ground troops in Libya. Secretary Gates affirmed this position yesterday^[7] and remained skeptical of the United States arming Libya rebels. Yet it is difficult to take them at their word. Two days later, *Reuters* reported that Obama authorized covert CIA action in Libya and indeed there have been “sneakers on the ground”^[8] for a few weeks.

This points to the major problem that has lingered since the intervention began: there is no obvious end game to these operations and the mission is opaque. President Obama launched a war of choice without clearly articulating to the American people what success would look like. He did not make a compelling case for why this situation is any different from the dozens of other crises the United States chose not to get involved in during the past 20 years.

Today in *Politico*, I have an op-ed addressing President Obama’s “power problem.”^[9] U.S. military might is unrivaled. We have certainly more than enough power to protect our vital national security interests, but that encourages policymakers to expand the concept of what constitutes “the national interest.”

The cries for intervention flow from that. While Libya has little, if anything, to do with U.S. national security, we have the military power to “do something,” so why shouldn’t we? Many of the Obama administration’s foreign policy advisors argued this point. Princeton’s Anne-Marie Slaughter, the former director of policy planning in the State Department asserted that “It would

have simply been criminal to sit back.” The United States, as the world’s dominant power, has a responsibility to act (implicitly anywhere). But I argue this rationale is dangerous:

What Obama, Slaughter and [National Security Council official Samantha] Power see as a clear moral imperative and an unadulterated good is, in fact, deeply problematic.

It is a particular challenge for the U.S. Washington is often pressed to use its military to help others in distress. That does not mean the U.S. always sends troops when called. Some places where U.S. troops did not go — for example, Rwanda, Congo and Burma — are as well-known as those where they did.

But this selective pattern of intervention reveals that each decision to send troops abroad reflects a choice based not on a calculation of national interest but, rather, on a far more subjective standard that immediately gives way to charges of hypocrisy and double standards.

Click [here](#) [9] to read the full op-ed.

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[6] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/28/remarks-president-address-nation-libya>

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[8] <http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/the-good-news-and-bad-news-about-sneakers-on-the-ground/>

[9] <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0311/52322.html>