



Hillary Clinton Falls on the Wrong Sword

By MALOU INNOCENT - October 18, 2012

"I take responsibility," Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told CNN this week, taking the blame for security failures at the American consulate in Benghazi that some lawmakers believe contributed to the killing of four Americans, including Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens.

Apparently, the buck stops with Hillary, as it should. She was among the handful of officials who urged U.S. military action to oust Libyan dictator Muammar Qadhafi. The intervention she endorsed, even if driven by altruistic impulses, put American weakness on full display, undermined Western interests elsewhere, and aggrandized America's imperial presidency.

In the early months of Libya's Arab Awakening, Secretary Clinton was reportedly reluctant to entangle the United States in the volatile post-revolutionary Muslim country. But as Libya's disorganized rebels began losing ground to Qadhafi loyalists, she became an advocate for humanitarian intervention. Last year, the secretary of state said in an interview, "We set into motion a policy that was on the right side of history, on the right side of our values, on the right side of our strategic interests in the region."

Many others agreed. But such ebullience failed to fully grasp three inherent limitations in Washington's ability to shape events on the ground.

First, despite the U.S. and NATO no-fly zone, the allies did not deploy post-conflict occupation forces after Qadhafi's fall—nor should they have. After enduring the human and financial costs of two prolonged and deeply unpopular wars, a majority of Americans across the political spectrum opposed U.S. military involvement in Libya. (Likewise, most Americans oppose U.S. military involvement in Syria when costs are factored in.) In such instances, diplomats like Clinton propose a superficially antiseptic course of action. They advocate arming rebels or intervening in some ostensibly limited fashion. That, however, draws America into new military conflicts with few checks on any future mission creep. Reports now suggest, unsurprisingly, that the White House is considering escalating its military involvement in Libya, as the vortex of that country's security vacuum sucks America in.

Even boots on the ground offer little solace. Looking back, it is doubtful that tens of thousands of American and NATO troops could have won over local Libyans and navigated their complex system of tribal politics. The limitations encountered by trying

to bring stability to war-ravaged states suggest American weakness, instead of demonstrating American strength. Look no further than Iraq and Afghanistan.

Second, the best plans for the intervention could not have overcome a host of unintended consequences. Overthrowing Qadhafi after he had given up his weapons of mass destruction program gave other odious governments the justification to acquire a nuclear deterrent. Another overlooked factor is that an untold number of Qadhafi's unsecured conventional weapons (plastic explosives, grenades, surface-to-air missiles, etc.), are now scattered across North Africa.

Reports also suggest that operatives linked to al Qaeda remain active in the new Libya, and may have taken part in the assault on the U.S. consulate in Benghazi. Furthermore, when some of Qadhafi's hired guns fled to northern Mali, it prompted a military coup that overthrew that country's nascent democracy. The world now has a net loss of one democracy, as Ben Friedman says. Ironically, Washington's intervention where it had no vital interests jeopardized important U.S. interests elsewhere.

Finally, a humanitarian intervention that hoped to deliver democracy to others inadvertently compromised our own. Americans have all too soon forgotten that President Barack Obama ordered military action in Libya without Congressional approval. Even Hillary Clinton, on the subject of Iran, once said, "[T]he Constitution requires Congress to authorize war. I do not believe that the president can take military action—including any kind of strategic bombing—against Iran without congressional authorization."

Lawmakers on Capitol Hill should have asserted their legislative prerogative more forcefully when the war was initially launched. Their past inaction undercuts the sincerity of their current protests.

Many Americans are rightfully frustrated with how Clinton and other senior officials have handled security in Libya, but such hostility is misdirected. Far more troubling is the Obama administration's arbitrary view of when American force should be used. Time and again, officials in Washington have been too willing to use American military force in foreign-civil conflicts of little strategic importance, whether in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq, and now Libya. That less-than-stellar track record should have shown Clinton why altruism is not enough to produce the outcomes America wants.