

Obama's clumsy Libya plan rocks Capitol Hill

Written by Charles D. Ellison Tribune Washington Correspondent
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As smoke rises across Libya, the war over political risks and consequences begins. The Obama administration appears unable to avoid the costs of what some observers complain is a sloppy public relations rollout that looked as dangerously clumsy as the debut of "[Spider Man on Broadway](#)".

Administration officials will attempt to frame it as an "intervention" or an "operation" or "military action." But, ultimately, the large scale use of weapons resulting in extended combat will surpass "the \$1 billion mark" according to [The National Journal](#).

"That makes it war," says one senior Democratic Congressional aide.

With a war-weary American public being tossed into another war it wasn't what many observers expected from a commander-in-chief who rode in on a larger electoral impression that he would be a "peace-time" president. The backdrop to that is [a recent Washington Post/ABC news poll](#) showing only 31 percent of Americans supporting the war in Afghanistan.

And there are angry members of Congress who believe the president needed Congressional approval for war — regardless of U.N. resolutions. "This is a teachable moment," said former presidential candidate [Rep. Dennis Kucinich \(D-OH\)](#), who dropped the word 'impeachment' during initial meetings when the first waves of missiles slammed into Libya last weekend. "The American people should understand that our Constitution does not provide for the president to wage war any times he pleases."

Which ultimately drew some uncomfortable comparisons to the Bush Administration's actions in seeking approval for ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Obama's decision making process seemed deliberately set to spite the Bush approach, outright dismissing the chance for Congressional input while eager to please international frat brothers at the United Nations.

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“The difference is that the Bush Administration with regards to both wars sought congressional authorization,” reminds Benjamin Friedman, a defense policy expert at the Cato Institute. “While they still had a very archaic view of Congress and its role, the Bush administration thought it would be useful politically to get Congressional authorization – which was given. That’s the big difference here.”

But, a more recent CBS News poll at the outset of multi-nation bombardment of Libya shows a dramatically different take on the action, with nearly 70 percent of Americans agreeing with the president’s actions in Libya. As political winds of fortune push the president’s back despite a perceived mediocre PR rollout, high public support could explain the hesitancy of many Congressional Black Caucus members to offer a firm position on what conventional wisdom dubs “a new war.”

Questioning the CBC on the topic of Libya presents an opportunity to address a major concern of constituents on the street: costs. While White House and Congress — pushed by ornery House Republicans — move forward on proposed cuts to critical social programs such as Community Development Block Grants, Head Start, WIC and college Pell Grants, the cost of the first full day of U.S. missile attacks was \$100 million – for the missiles. The Center for Strategic Assessments estimates a baseline sum of \$800 million. Yet, strangely enough, a quick inventory of CBC Member websites showed press releases on everything from the celebration of the Affordable Care Act’s first anniversary to sentiments regarding the recent bombing of a bus station in Jerusalem.

To date, CBC Chair Rep. Emmanuel Cleaver D-Mo., has not issued a statement despite requests for comment from the Tribune.

And when the question of U.S. military action and costs in Libya — for or against — was posed to Philly-area Rep. Chaka Fattah (D-PA), digital tension was palpable with the last response from an aide questioning the \$1 billion figure.

While Rep. Charlie Rangel (D-NY) appeared to dip his foot in the fray, it didn’t come without a bit of ambiguity. “I believe the American people would decide in favor of stopping innocent people from being killed or wounded by the forces aligned with Gaddafi,” said Rangel. “However, the integrity of the United States government before the world, and before its own people, insists on Congress stepping up to assume its responsibility.”

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An aide in Rep. Maxine Waters' (D-CA) office also rocked that line. "A lot of people are concerned about process and results," was the mysterious messaging for the day with others in CBC offices promising statements by Monday or Tuesday of the following week.

"In all of the back and forth," said Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. spokesman Andrew Wilson, "Innocent people were being targeted." But not without adding: "[It would have been good to have] Congress consulted and notified in a real way."

Alabama Rep. Terri Sewell (D-AL), newly elected and probably not wanting sudden attention on such a hot button issue, used "unreachable" as the official excuse for no statement till the following week.

Normally considered the foremost authority and talkative Member on Capitol Hill about African affairs, even North Jersey pol Rep. Donald Payne, D-N.J., had not yet developed a public statement or position on events unfolding in the Northern African desert. The most recent press release on Payne's website dealt with the specter of civil war in the West African nation of Cote' D'Ivoire, but no single mention of the most influential political and monetary force on the Continent: Col. Muammar Gaddafi.

Republicans, predictably, cried foul over the telecommuting nature of the President's process on Libya. While U.S. assets in the Mediterranean Sea were put in play, critics were quick to point out that he was "chilling" in places like Brazil and Chile on a South American tour. Others spit fire on his use of French President Nicolas Sarkozy as the front-man for the effort. "When we have President Sarkozy dictating the pace and terms and conditions for security initiatives in the world, we know that we've entered a new era in terms of America's place and leadership and vision for security around the world, and that concerns me greatly," former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty, in the wake of [a what some described as a flat no-news announcement of a presidential exploratory committee](#)

Still, others like CBC Member Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-NY), were willing to offer some benefit of the doubt. "I think the President did deliberate that this wasn't a go-it-alone operation," said Meeks during a recent MSNBC appearance. "The President did exactly what should have been done."