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Fantasies of a Liberal Interventionist

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Ill-fated U.S. military adventures abroad have had various fathers, even though some of those fathers have tried to disavow paternity once the problems became apparent. Neoconservatives figure prominently in this story, especially given that one of the most costly misadventures in recent times, the invasion of Iraq in 2003, was a distinctly neocon project. But even with that project, the neocon promoters of the war had to manufacture a rationale that tapped into another

strain of sentiment that has helped to lead to such misadventures: the fear of terrorist or other attacks against the United States itself. Yet another paternal line is liberal interventionism, which distinguishes itself from both the terrorism-related fears and the neocon objective of spreading democracy and free market values by focusing on the humanitarian objective of saving foreign lives overseas.

All three of these dimensions—democratization, counterterrorism and humanitarianism—are figuring prominently in current rhetoric about use of U.S. military force in the Middle East and especially Syria. Collectively all three dimensions have been creating substantial political pressure in favor of use of more such force than the Obama administration has used to date. A representative of the liberal interventionist school—and of some of the worst errors of that school—is *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen. Although questions certainly can be raised [4] about whether Cohen merits the label of liberal and whether the *Post* is justified in considering him a “left-leaning” columnist, Cohen himself endeavors to distinguish himself from schools of thought more associated with the political right, whether such distinctions are justified or not.

Lately Cohen has been lashing out at President Obama regarding the use, or non-use, of military force in Syria. Cohen repeatedly insists that the United States needs “to do more” there militarily. He seems to have less concern about exactly what form more military action should take or how such action would work, except to try to dispel any perception that whatever he has in mind is anything like the previous administration's costly misadventure in Iraq. In a column [5] earlier this month Cohen wrote, “George W. Bush's war was a lesson to us all. But from the start of the Syrian crisis, no one sane was proposing to do it all over again. Instead, the proposal was to intervene early and attempt to avoid the bloodbath and humanitarian calamity that have resulted.” The column refers again later to “the proposal,” but the reader is left to guess what “the proposal” consists of, other than that it somehow means “to do more” than what the United States is doing militarily now.

In a column three weeks later [6], Cohen said “nobody of consequence ever publicly proposed putting substantial numbers of U.S. service members in the Middle East.” In doing so he had to exclude explicitly former Republican presidential nominee and current Senate Armed Services Committee chairman John McCain, as well as Senator Lindsey Graham (and Cohen really should have mentioned others as well) from his assertions about what sane and consequential people have or have not been proposing. Finally in the same column we learn what “the proposal” is: according to Cohen, it consists of “establishing a no-fly zone to ground Assad's gunships and maybe taking a shot or two at a key government installation.”

The concept of a no-fly zone—or rather, just the *term* “no-fly zone”—has become a popular way to call for more use of military force while not arguing in favor of a new ground war and also making it sound as if the caller has a specific and well-conceived proposal even if he doesn't. Like many others who have flown the term “no fly-zone,” Cohen offers no details about what such an operation would entail, and he gives no indication that he has ever bothered to think about such details.

Despite the salience of barrel bombs that Syrian regime forces have dropped from helicopters, most of the bloodshed the regime has caused has come from ground operations, including the pummeling of urban neighborhoods with ground-based artillery. A no-fly zone can be a useful way to help protect a well-established and friendly force on the ground from attacks by a hostile air force, as has been true in the past in Iraqi Kurdistan, but that is not the situation in Syria at all. Who would control the ground below a no-fly zone in Syria? If it isn't the Syrian regime's army, or a substantial Western ground force, who is it? One of those ghost-like forces of armed Syrian “moderates”? Or maybe the Al-Nusra Front? Or worst of all, maybe ISIS—which does not have an air force and which Cohen, astoundingly, does not even mention in his column, apart from a passing reference to past activity in Iraq. Such an omission represents an incredibly myopic way for anyone to address any question of security policy in Syria today.

Cohen indulges in another favorite tactic of those who want to fulminate about current policy toward Syria without having to offer any effective alternative: to assert that if only a different policy had been pursued earlier, vast problems would have been avoided. Cohen writes that if his “proposal” had been adopted “early on,” then “upward of 300,000 Syrian deaths” and the displacement of millions of refugees might have been avoided. But like many others who have pushed this counterfactual hypothesis, he offers no reason to believe that the factors that have made the Syrian war a bloody mess would have been any less relevant and less consequential a couple of years ago than they are now. There would have been the same differences and distrust between the Syria regime and the majority of the Syrian population, the same sectarian divisions, the same weaknesses and disadvantages of “moderates” in an environment of civil warfare, the same multiple and intersecting lines of conflict, and the same political culture that underlies the entire mess. The counterfactual has become a screen that hides a lack of analysis. And it is comically absurd to suggest that “maybe taking a shot or two at a government installation” would have helped to save lives numbering in the hundreds of thousands.

For liberal interventionists, a big black mark that somehow needs to be explained away is the Western intervention in Libya, a case where the liberal/humanitarian interventionist viewpoint did, at least for a moment, drive policy of the Obama administration. Post-intervention Libya has been sustained chaos in which many lives have been lost and threatened not only directly in a continued civil war but also through spillover effects of the chaos. Men and materiel from post-Qaddafi Libya have been factors in terrorism and violence across much of North Africa and the Middle East, and Libya is the place outside Iraq and Syria where ISIS today can most plausibly claim an organizational presence and not just an inspirational one. And all this is in addition to the awful message that was sent to other rogue regimes when Western governments seized an opportunity to overthrow a leader who, through a peaceful negotiated agreement, had given up his unconventional weapons programs and his involvement in international terrorism.

Cohen repeats the oft-voiced claim that the intervention precluded what would have been certain genocide in eastern Libya. No matter how often this claim gets repeated, there still is not reason to believe it. Qaddafi certainly made clear he wanted to deal harshly with those who had taken up arms against his regime, but there is nothing else in what he said, and more importantly in what he did, to suggest that a broader genocide was imminent. Qaddafi had been in power four decades, and he had plenty of opportunity to perpetrate genocide if he had wanted to, including in earlier stages of the revolt that was in progress at the time of the intervention.

Regarding Libya, Cohen takes pains to explain that we should not confuse his point of view with that of regime-changing neocons. Regime change and democratization were not the purpose of the intervention in Libya, he says. Well, that's right in terms of what the Obama administration and other Western governments publicly declared as their purpose, but what else besides regime change, practically and logically, could have been the end game of this operation? If Qaddafi really was, in Cohen's words, a "psychopath" and "madman" who was bent on genocide, how could things end just by stopping a regime advance on one battle front west of Benghazi? How could the story end and the West even begin to claim success for its operation unless it meant, thanks to the Western air attacks on regime forces, the collapsing of the regime's position until someone shot the dictator in a ditch?

On the Libya issue, Cohen endeavors to defend Hillary Clinton against criticisms from her primary opponent Bernie Sanders. The defense is centered on the notion of how the intervention was supposedly about preventing genocide and not about regime change, but Cohen also strangely likens Sanders to, of all people, Ted Cruz. In the Cohen version, the positions of Sanders and Cruz on Libya, and of both of them as well as Barack Obama on Syria, consist of a "do nothing" approach that pays insufficient attention to the lives of non-Americans. One wonders on what planet Cohen has been residing while all the rhetoric about Syria has been filling American airwaves in recent months, given that Cruz's most distinctive proposal about military force in Syria has been to call for "carpet bombing". That certainly doesn't sound like Bernie Sanders, or like Barack Obama for that matter, even if Cruz was talking about targeting ISIS rather than the Assad regime.

Cohen has an inconsistent way of weighing the lives of Americans and non-Americans, depending on what argument he is trying to make. In some places he takes off his international humanitarian hat and seems to place a much higher value on American lives, as when he notes that "no Americans died in the Libyan bombing campaign" while saying nothing about the deadly post-intervention chaos. Or when he writes, with Syria particularly and unrealistically in mind, of the need to intervene to "at little or no cost to us in American lives." But elsewhere in the same columns he seems to put that hat back on and not give any preferred consideration to American lives. He knocks Mr. Obama for the estimates the president gave in a recent meeting with journalists about likely American casualties that would result from expanded ground operations in the Middle East. He even knocks the president for talking about his visits at Walter Reed Hospital with maimed veterans who have lost limbs and of how the prospect of ordering troops into battle and leading to more such casualties has to weigh heavily on the decisions of any incumbent president. Cohen's comment about this is, "Life presents mean choices. Limbs were lost in Paris, too."

That last comment suggests a comparison between casualties from international terrorism and those from military operations that have been conducted in the name of combating terrorism, although if Cohen did the math he might not like the result. (Then again, maybe he wouldn't care, given how his recent writing on Syria has been as narrowly focused on combating the Assad regime, to the exclusion of any concern with ISIS or terrorism, as the most narrow-minded Sunni Gulf Arab.) Even the death toll of the granddaddy of all international terrorist incidents, 9/11, was surpassed by American deaths in the Iraq War, which post-9/11 public alarm about terrorism had made politically possible.

One last observation about the Iraq War and Cohen. Despite his striving to distinguish himself from neocons, and despite his distancing-himself reference to “George W. Bush's Iraq war,” Cohen clearly has not learned lessons from that war. Cohen supported the invasion of Iraq. Later after the war went sour, he like many others who had supported the invasion used an “if only I had known” excuse [7] to try to explain away that support. But like many of those others, including many Congressional Democrats who had voted in favor of the war resolution, getting bamboozled by the Bush administration's public rationale for the war was not the reason they supported it. In Cohen's case, he explicitly recognized before the war how flimsy that rationale was, but nonetheless still supported launching the war. His pre-war position directly contradicted his later effort to make excuses. In a column [8] shortly before the invasion in March 2003, Cohen wrote, “I grant you that in the run-up to this war, the Bush administration has slipped, stumbled and fallen on its face. It has advanced untenable, unproven arguments. It has oscillated from disarmament to regime change to bringing democracy to the Arab world. It has linked Hussein with al Qaeda when no such link has been established. It has warned of an imminent Iraqi nuclear program when, it seems, that's not the case.” And yet, said Cohen, war was necessary because “sometimes peace is no better.”

Underlying this position was one of the worst attributes of liberal interventionism, which is a compulsion to make big gestures, including very costly and destructive gestures, basically because while seeing bad things going on in the world it gives one a warm feeling in the tummy to make such gestures against the bad things, regardless of how sound or unsound is the logical case for doing so and regardless of how costly or ineffective the results may be. To the extent Barack Obama is receiving brickbats from the likes of Richard Cohen for not falling into this line of thinking, or rather of emoting, he is serving the country well.