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Stay out of Libya

by Sheldon Richman
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It's good to see that the Pentagon is unenthusiastic about military intervention in Libya. But that hasn't stopped armchair generals such as Sen. John Kerry from pushing for a no-fly zone over that country.

Kerry thinks he can make his plan more appealing by couching it in internationalist terms, but we know the American people would bear the brunt of the burden. Kerry is joined by Sens. Joe Lieberman and John McCain, the Senate's two most obnoxious militarists. Regarding the military's reluctance to take on another country, McCain said, "[They] always seem to find reasons why you can't do something rather than why you can."

Maybe the Pentagon is acknowledging something that McCain, Kerry, and Lieberman seem to ignore: They are calling for war on a country that has not attacked the United States. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates criticized the discussion about a no-fly zone as "loose talk." He added, "Let's just call a spade a spade. A no-fly zone begins with an attack on Libya. That's the way you do a no-fly zone. And then you can fly planes around the country and not worry about our guys being shot down."

Gates's cautionary language is welcome after Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's and President Obama's press secretary had referred to U.S. action as a live option. In typical Clinton fashion, the secretary said, "We are taking no option off the table so long as the Libyan government continues to turn its guns on its own people." Really? No option? Does that include a full-scale invasion? How about tactical nuclear weapons? Drones

armed with Hellfire missiles have been particularly effective at killing innocent people in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Are they on the table too?

Gates was not alone in his warning. Gen. James Mattis, commander of U.S. Central Command, and other officials said that taking out Libya's air and missile defenses would be no small operation; hundreds of airplanes would be needed. Gates said he was advised that a no-fly zone "requires more airplanes than you would find on a single aircraft carrier." It would be, he said, a "big operation in a big country."

None of that stopped the Senate from unanimously passing a resolution prodding the UN Security Council to take up the question of a no-fly zone. And two U.S. amphibious warships were headed to Libya through the Suez Canal, supposedly for humanitarian purposes. But they aren't called "warships" for nothing.

For all the bluster about a no-fly zone, it's not quite clear what difference it would make. Libya's Col. Muammar Qaddafi is using ground forces primarily to battle rebels trying to drive him from power. According to the Associated Press, "Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that despite media reports of Libyan aircraft attacking rebel areas, the Pentagon had not confirmed any air attacks."

So a no-fly zone would be little more than symbolic. But it could be a costly symbol. Mullen cautioned against underestimating Libya's air defenses. Moreover, establishing a no-fly zone would be an act of war, with consequences no one can foresee. Haven't we had enough of American politicians, sitting safely in their seats of power, sending young people off to war?

The case against U.S. intervention in Libya, however, goes beyond the prudential. There is no doubt that Qaddafi is a brutal and now desperate dictator willing to send mercenaries to mow down civilians seeking freedom from his iron grip. But that does not justify U.S. intervention, which would require the taxpayers to finance yet another open-ended military operation in the Arab and Muslim world. Regardless of how Obama and Clinton would intend the operation, the rest of the world would see it in the context of the long U.S. imperial record in the Middle East.

American presidents have sought to police the globe for generations. What has it gotten us? Endless war abroad, and big government and economic hardship at home. Instead of being a beacon of liberty, the country is a symbol of militarism and death. Obama, the fraudulent peace advocate, has followed the same interventionist course. He should not be allowed to extend it to Libya.