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War for NATO

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Governments don't abide by the same rules that govern the rest of us. They steal. They kidnap. They kill. And they do so with impunity, possessing a monopoly over the legally sanctioned, societally condoned use of force.

So it's odd to see University of Michigan history professor Juan Cole writing of the U.S. government's commitment to a military alliance, NATO, in terms of a "moral obligation" – one to bomb Libya, no less – as if the same state that killed millions in Vietnam and Iraq possesses the desire or ability to be an upstanding moral actor. Odder still: demonstrating the existence of said "moral obligation" by citing NATO's participation in an unjust military occupation of Afghanistan that only underscores the inability of Western powers to carry out the "humanitarian" wars of liberal lore.

But that's just what Cole does in a Sunday post [attempting to justify](#) the Obama administration's decision to bomb Libya by citing the U.S.-led NATO's decision to take over the U.S.-led campaign, as if that move -- taken weeks after the initial bombing runs -- compels skeptical Americans to recognize the Rightness and Justness of the president's commitment of U.S. forces (and CIA personnel) to the latest and greatest war in a country that, coincidentally, has massive oil reserves.

"[D]oes that decision not lay a moral obligation on the U.S. to lend support to the effort of its allies?" Cole writes, directing his softball of a question to Glenn Greenwald, who's no doubt in the process of penning a 1,200-word evisceration. The U.S. had the most "robust ability" to take out Gaddafi's anti-aircraft batteries, Cole writes, so if it refused to participate in the war of choice its less-robust allies could -- potentially! -- have had their jets shot down, undermining their commitment to NATO (which would be a bad thing, apparently).

“Should the United States have said, well, too bad, we are not getting involved over there?”

The answer, of course, is "yes." That a war of choice incapable of achieving its stated end of protecting civilians might prove costly or difficult to the U.S.'s allies is no good reason to start bombing with them; as Cole would have argued were this still 2003 and a Republican was in office, real allies point out when their friends are making mistakes, they don't join in.

But in 2011, Cole adopts the opposite stance, saying NATO's commitment to a bloody war he's [likened to Vietnam](#) compels the U.S. government to join in the bombing of Libya (as if it was oh-so-reluctant to fire 193 of the first 200 missiles in that war):

I'd like to remind everyone that NATO did invoke article 5 with regard to the September 11 attacks, which led to a substantial NATO presence in Afghanistan in support of the US war on al-Qaeda and its Taliban backers. Coalition deaths in that struggle include 362 British troops, 155 Canadian troops, 55 French troops, and 40 Danish ones.

While these death tolls are smaller than the American ones, they are very large for the countries concerned, **especially since their publics (with the exception of the UK) almost universally desperately did not want to be in Afghanistan.** If, having made this supreme sacrifice so many times for the sake of their NATO alliance with the United States, these countries now met with a yawn from Washington and a disinterested wave saying ‘so long folks, you are on your own’ — surely it would mean the end of NATO and would likely send America’s stock in Europe into the toilet.

Thanks for the reminder, professor: NATO has long been a means for the U.S. to circumvent democratic input and gain supporting firepower for its unjust wars and brutal military occupations – wars and occupations “almost universally” opposed by the citizens on whose behalf they're ostensibly being undertaken. But are we supposed to think that's a good thing -- that an alliance that repeatedly defies the will of the public to carry out immoral wars is something to be preserved and protected, rather than undermined at every opportunity?

If Cole really cares about protecting civilians, he should be cheering “the end of NATO,” not raising the specter of its collapse as a bugaboo by which to justify another bombing campaign against a Muslim nation with oil. After all, as Cole points out, NATO is crucial to the occupation of Afghanistan, where almost every day [brings news](#) of more innocent women and children murdered by their country's occupiers. Should the alliance collapse -- as it should have two decades ago when its stated reason for existence, the Soviet Union, dissolved -- so could the occupation of Afghanistan (and the deadly drone war next door in Pakistan), an outcome that would save a lot more lives than tossing cruise missiles into Libya and prolonging a bloody civil war.

But the good professor seems more concerned with myopic imperial considerations and the playing the role of an ivory tower Kissinger -- pretending nation-states that carry out immoral wars have "moral obligations" to a military alliance -- than the big picture ramifications of bolstering an organization that regularly kills poor people who have the misfortune of living somewhere of "strategic interest." A U.S. refusal to participate in a war against Libya could anger officials in Britain and France, Cole gravely warns, which could jeopardize the very

existence of the military alliance that makes the occupation of Afghanistan tenable!

And you know what? Cole could -- fingers crossed -- be right. And with respect to his support for the war in Libya, that's precisely why he's wrong.