

New War Rationale: 'Protect Civilians'

Exclusive: The United Nations Security Council authorized NATO's air campaign in Libya "to protect civilians." But that rationale has been stretched by President Barack Obama and other NATO leaders to justify a war for "regime change" that actually is putting civilian lives in danger, reports Robert Parry.

By Robert Parry

The world has grown accustomed to the euphemism "collateral damage" to deaden human outrage over the killing of civilians. It is a phrase deployed when a big power or one of its friends gets a little trigger-happy while going after some "bad guy."

Such civilian deaths are deemed regrettable, perhaps worthy of a half-hearted apology, but nothing that merits a special tribunal to prosecute the noble officials responsible for the "mistake." Of course, the same international audience is supposed to get angry when some "rogue" state or group kills civilians in pursuit of its military goals. Then, a tribunal is called for.

But the war in Libya has brought into prominence a parallel euphemism that justifies not only accidental killings but the military conflicts that guarantee such deaths. The new rationale for war is "to protect civilians," an Orwellian twist that NATO and the Obama administration adopted in March to justify an air-and-ground war to achieve regime change in Libya.

Naturally, the NATO powers repeatedly denied that "regime change" was their goal, although their war planes and intelligence agencies have coordinated military operations with Libyan rebels whose stated goal has been to eliminate longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi, an objective that appears close to success.

NATO authorities have denied, too, that their missile strikes against Gaddafi's compound were "assassination attempts," although one attack did kill one of Gaddafi's sons and three of his grandchildren. Yes, these victims were "collateral damage."

But the key to the Libyan war was the United Nations Security Council's passage of a resolution on March 17 authorizing a "no-fly zone" over Libya and permitting member states "to take all necessary measures to protect civilians and civilian populated areas."

Less noticed, the UN resolution also demanded "the immediate establishment of a ceasefire" and "the need to intensify efforts to find a solution to the crisis,"

but those words of peace essentially became window-dressing for war.

Peace proposals from the African Union and offers from Gaddafi's side for a ceasefire and even democratic elections were spurned out of hand by the NATO-backed rebels. AU officials were literally chased away when they arrived in Benghazi to seek negotiations.

In other words, NATO and its allied rebels never took seriously the parts of the UN mandate seeking "to protect civilians" by resolving the conflict through negotiations. Instead, the war was expanded westward toward Tripoli to achieve Gaddafi's ouster, i.e. regime change.

The Security Council's phrase "to protect civilians" was just the camel's nose under the tent for war.

After the UN resolution was passed, NATO unleashed its planes to devastate Gaddafi's defenses, incinerate his soldiers in the field and blast away parts of Libya's capital city of Tripoli. NATO nations and Arab members of the coalition also dispatched military trainers to upgrade the rebels' fighting capacity; supplied weapons to the insurgents; and provided crucial intelligence and command-and-control assistance.

Human Toll

Now that NATO's rebels have entered Tripoli and driven Gaddafi from his seat of power though he and some of his loyalists fight on the world is finally getting a chance to see the human toll of this six-month conflict.

Atrocities are being exposed on both sides with reports of mass executions of captured soldiers. Many civilians, far from being "protected," have ended up in hospital morgues.

Though the New York Times has staunchly backed the Libyan war and chided President Barack Obama for not providing more U.S. warplanes [a Times article on Aug. 26](#) described the flood of dead and wounded arriving at Tripoli Central Hospital, whose "morgue was already overflowing with more than 115 bodies of fighters and civilians still unclaimed."

The article continued: "Two doctors said the hospital had treated as many as 500 patients a day this week for gunshot wounds as the rebels struggled to overcome the Qaddafi loyalists who stubbornly continued to fight.

"Of the six days since the revolt reached Tripoli, the capital, Thursday may have been the bloodiest. Doctors and journalists reported evidence of fresh massacres by both sides around the city, while the battle to establish full

control of Colonel Qaddafi's breached compound, Bab al-Aziziya, raged on.

"In their drive to take command of Tripoli, the rebels concentrated their forces on a block-by-block battle for the streets of the Abu Salim neighborhood, a center of Colonel Qaddafi's support. By late afternoon, the fighting had once again swamped Tripoli Central Hospital with wounded civilians and combatants."

Besides the inherent dangers of a tribal-based society descending into bloody chaos as the world saw in Iraq after the U.S.-led invasion overthrew dictator Saddam Hussein there is the political challenge of achieving a meaningful peace when a foreign-connected military operation has removed a longtime dictator.

But perhaps the biggest risk is that American triumphalism will preclude the kinds of concessions that are necessary after violent passions have been whipped up on all sides.

Unlearned Lessons

The Obama administration insists that it has learned lessons from the Iraq War when President George W. Bush dispatched U.S. ground troops and then insisted on purging the Iraqi army and the government bureaucracy. Though Obama withheld U.S. ground troops from Libya, he has shown little sign that he has grasped other lessons from Iraq in 2003 or from Afghanistan in 1989.

Washington's conventional wisdom on Iraq after the U.S. conquest and on Afghanistan after the Soviet Union withdrew its forces is that the United States needed detailed plans for rebuilding and reshaping those societies. That it needed to stay engaged in a much bigger way.

George W. Bush, who invaded Iraq under the false pretense that it possessed weapons of mass destruction and might share them with al-Qaeda terrorists, is faulted for not having anticipated the complex problems of occupying Iraq and not deploying enough resources to repair a shattered society.

Similarly, his father, George H.W. Bush, is criticized for supposedly walking away from Afghanistan once the Soviet troops left in February 1989.

What is missed in these critiques is that the greater problem was not U.S. follow-through but American hubris, a sense that a military victory precluded the need for negotiations with the apparently defeated enemy. Triumphalism trumped practicality.

After the U.S. conquest of Iraq in 2003, Bush's proconsul Paul Bremer insisted on a sweeping "de-Baathification," stripping the bureaucracy of officials who belonged to Saddam Hussein's Baath Party. And, instead of negotiating with

senior officers of the Iraqi Army, Bremer simply cashiered them and their men.

In Afghanistan, contrary to the myth that the United States simply quit Afghanistan once the Soviets left in 1989, the real history is that George H.W. Bush expanded the authorization for a continued U.S. covert war, using Afghan "self-determination" as the excuse for funneling hundreds of millions of more dollars to CIA-backed mujahedeen fighting the pro-Soviet regime that was hanging on in Kabul.

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev sought negotiations on a ceasefire and the creation of an Afghan unity government, but George H.W. Bush and his inner circle, including senior national security aide Robert Gates, sensed total victory was at hand and rebuffed Gorbachev's proposals.

U.S. triumphalism carried the day, with the expectation that the CIA's mujahedeen would quickly oust the pro-Soviet Afghan President Najibullah. But Najibullah's army proved more resilient than the CIA had expected, beating back offensive after offensive.

By the time, President George H.W. Bush realized that the rosy predictions from Gates and the CIA had been wrong, it was too late to get peace talks on track. Soviet President Gorbachev was fighting for his own government's survival.

Rise of the Taliban

Najibullah's government actually outlasted the Soviet Union, which collapsed in 1991. He fell in 1992, bringing an end to his communist regime but not the war.

The capital of Kabul came under the control of a relatively moderate rebel force led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, an Islamist but not a fanatic. However, Massoud, a Tajik, was not favored by Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which the CIA had used to funnel supplies to the mujahedeen but which backed more extreme Pashtun elements.

The various Afghan warlords battled for another four years as the ISI readied its own army of Islamic extremists drawn from Pashtun refugee camps inside Pakistan. With the ISI's backing, this group, known as the Taliban, entered Afghanistan with the promise of restoring order.

The Taliban seized the capital of Kabul in September 1996, driving Massoud into a northward retreat. The ousted communist leader Najibullah, who had stayed in Kabul, sought shelter in the United Nations compound, but was captured. The Taliban tortured, castrated and killed him, his mutilated body hung from a light pole.

The triumphant Taliban imposed harsh Islamic law on Afghanistan. Their rule was especially devastating to women who had made gains toward equal rights under the communists, but were forced by the Taliban to live under highly restrictive rules, to cover themselves when in public, and to forgo schooling.

The Taliban also granted refuge to Saudi exile Osama bin Laden, who had fought with the Afghan mujahedeen against the Soviets in the 1980s. Bin Laden then used Afghanistan as the base of operations for his terrorist organization, al-Qaeda, setting the stage for the next Afghan War in 2001.

So, President Obama may be drawing the wrong lessons from the disasters in Iraq and Afghanistan by misreading or misunderstanding the history.

Yes, Obama did keep U.S. ground forces out of Libya unlike George W. Bush's conquest of Iraq. And Obama's aides say they understand the need to stay engaged with Libya while it builds new institutions in a post-Gaddafi era.

But Obama appears to have fallen into the same trap that swallowed up the two President Bushes. Rather than negotiate for a compromise settlement that would include some concessions to the "bad guys" in this case, some accommodation with Gaddafi and his supporters Obama has pushed for total victory.

That, in turn, has increased the bloodshed and the bitterness, pitting not only loyalists against rebels, but Libyan tribe against Libyan tribe.

Though one can hope that Gaddafi and his troops surrender and accept their defeat, chances remain for a continuing bloodbath that will claim the lives of both young soldiers and many civilians.

In that case, NATO's expansive interpretation of what it means "to protect civilians" may look even more hypocritical.

[For more on these topics, see Robert Parry's *Secrecy & Privilege* and *Neck Deep*, now available in a two-book set for the discount price of only \$19. For details, [click here.](#)]

Robert Parry broke many of the Iran-Contra stories in the 1980s for the Associated Press and Newsweek. His latest book, *Neck Deep: The Disastrous Presidency of George W. Bush*, was written with two of his sons, Sam and Nat, and can be ordered at neckdeepbook.com. His two previous books, *Secrecy & Privilege: The Rise of the Bush Dynasty from Watergate to Iraq* and *Lost History: Contras, Cocaine, the Press & 'Project Truth'* are also available there.
