

Libya and the Strength of the American Foreign Policy Establishment

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The NATO involvement in Libya continues characterized by an anticipated ambiguity about next steps, overall goals and methods of reaching those goals as well as the real possibility that this timely intervention may, in fact, have saved thousands of lives. The decision to intervene in Libya, while first resisted by the Obama administration has been generally accepted by both Democrats and Republicans in Washington who have disagreed about the timing and methods, but less about the decision itself. While there has been some dissent and criticism of the Obama administration for this decision, most of that has come from the ideological extremes or from ordinary citizens.

The intervention in Libya could become one of the biggest foreign policy successes of recent years if it is seen as preventing mass killings and helping move a nasty dictator out of power, or as a major policy failure if the U.S. gets pulled into yet another long term entanglement with no end in sight. Regardless of the outcome, the decision to intervene is, even at this time, additionally significant because it is a clear victory for the bipartisan American foreign policy establishment where the need for an interventionist foreign policy, the ability of the US to get what it wants and the cost of various interventions are rarely questioned.

The foreign policy establishment was not, of course, unanimous in calling for intervention in Libya. The opposition in congress came primarily from the far left, including people like Dennis Kucinich and the far right, including people like Ron Paul, while most politicians in between those poles supported the intervention. Within the administration Defense Secretary Robert Gates, a man with deep roots in the foreign policy establishment, was one of the strongest voices against the intervention, but much of the rest of the bipartisan foreign policy leadership, ranging from the center left to the right supported this intervention.

The decision to intervene was made largely because Secretary of State Hillary Clinton persuaded President Obama it was worth it. It would be hard to think of a better metaphor for the foreign policy establishment's power within the administration than Clinton convincing Obama to change his mind. The 2008 primary between these two was, among other things, a battle between the establishment personified by Clinton who had been a fixture in Washington since the early 1990s and Obama who was, as late as 2007, a genuine outsider in Washington.

The intervention in Libya arises from the same mix of humanitarian and self-interested motives as many recent interventions. In Bosnia and Kosovo the outcome was somewhat successful. In Iraq and elsewhere this has been far less clear. In the former two actions,

American casualties have been relatively few while in Afghanistan and Iraq the cost has been considerably higher in lives and treasure. Similar examples can be found throughout the entire post-war period. The foreign policy community has a built in bias towards intervention which leads many in that establishment to frequently spin out the rosier scenarios and cite only the positive precedents, but it is always important to be prepared for things not to go well and to think about the gloomiest scenarios. It is surprising how quickly this lesson, made so obvious in Iraq, has been forgotten.

The residual power of the foreign policy establishment indicates that, at least for now, the U.S. will continue to approach foreign policy decisions within the same narrow policy bandwidth based upon the same assumptions of the last several decades and that the power of new forces in American politics such as the anti-war left or the isolationist wing of the Tea Party has been exaggerated. However, it is not yet clear whether this indicates a resurgence of the foreign policy establishment or a last triumph of a waning establishment heralding a new approach to foreign policy. It is likely that the answer to that will be determined not in Washington, but in Libya. Accordingly, if the foreign policy establishment is to survive, it must get Libya right.