

# USA & Libya: The Innocence of the Liberal Hawk

Monday 18 April 2011, by [YOUNGE Gary](#) (Date first published: 24 March 2011).

In the first flush of the occupation of Iraq, shortly after the statues were pulled down, Thomas Friedman wrote, “Whether you were for or against this war...you have to feel good that right has triumphed over wrong. America did the right thing here. It toppled one of the most evil regimes on the face of the earth, and I don’t think we know even a fraction of how deep that evil went.”

Flash forward eight years, and the *Financial Times*’s Gideon Rachman writes, “For all the justified anxiety about the Libyan conflict, it is important to remember the potential gains. The first goal is humanitarian. The Gaddafi regime is extremely brutal and would have extracted a horrible revenge on the people and cities involved in the rebellion. If things go well, intervening in Libya might also help to turn the tide against the gathering forces of reaction in the Middle East. A democratic Middle East remains in the long-term interests of its people, and of the rest of the world.”

The innocence of the liberal hawk is one of the few truly renewable resources America seems to have in abundance. Liberal hawks treasure their innocence but are also very careless with it, for they keep on losing it. And each time they misplace it, they manage to find it again just in time for the next bad idea.

Libya is not Iraq. This particular spate of bombing comes with United Nations approval; the United States did not lead the charge but followed with initial reluctance. And the invitation to attack did come from a credible resistance movement within Libya.

And yet, although the contexts are different, the flaws in logic, strategy and morality remain broadly the same. In the line famously attributed to Mark Twain, “History doesn’t repeat itself. At best it sometimes rhymes.” Particularly familiar is the way a certain strand of liberal opinion is rallying to the cause of American militarism.

The call from Libyan rebels for a no-fly zone matters. Those who are resisting Qaddafi deserve our support. But they don’t single-handedly determine the nature of it. Solidarity is not a process by which you unquestioningly forfeit responsibility for your own actions to another; it involves an assessment of what is prudent and what is possible. The left should not be in denial that nonintervention could have meant defeat for the Libyan revolution. If the balance of forces on the ground could not sustain the resistance on their own, this may well have been a consequence. The spontaneous, organic nature of these uprisings over the past few months has shown that democratic revolutions are a messy, unpredictable and complex process whereby shifts in collective popular confidence can translate into rifts between political, military and state establishments.

But neither should we be browbeaten with accusations that by opposing military intervention, we are in effect supporting Qaddafi—particularly not by supporters of states who were until recently arming him. Because arguments against Qaddafi are not the same as arguments for bombing. Since the allied forces insist that neither regime change nor occupation is the goal, it is difficult to fathom what the goal is. If Qaddafi remains, the country will be split. If the bombing stops, Qaddafi, all the more dangerous for being depleted, will likely finish the job. If Qaddafi goes, we have no idea what

ethnic and regional rifts will emerge. What victory looks like under these circumstances is anybody's guess.

Far from being a knee-jerk response to Western military action, opposition to the bombing marks a considered reflection on the West's knee-jerk impulse to mistake war for foreign policy. This impulse follows a well-worn circular logic in three parts: (1) Something must be done now. (2) This is something. (3) So we must do it. And that something invariably involves bombing.

Such sophistry treats "now" as its own abstract point in time: a moment that bears no legacy and carries no consequences. Amnesia and ignorance are the privileges of the powerful. But the powerless, who live with the ramifications, do not have the luxury of forgetting. They do not forget Shatila, Falluja, Abu Ghraib or Jenin—to name but a few horrific war crimes in which the West was complicit.

This time around, however, there is no need for historical references, because the hypocrisy is playing out in real time. When protests started in Tunisia in January, the French foreign minister offered the Tunisian police training to "restore calm." The day before Libya was attacked, dozens of protesters were shot dead in Yemen. Less than a week before, Saudi forces invaded Bahrain, where many protesters have been killed. These are American allies.

So while the West clearly has the power to intervene, given its history of colonialism and imperialism, it has no more credibility to do so on humanitarian grounds in this region than Iran would to bomb Bahrain in defense of the Shiites who are currently being killed there.

The question of whether the West should be involved in this region is moot. It has been intervening for several decades, arming despots (including Qaddafi), propping up dictators and ignoring human rights abuses. The question is how it intervenes and in whose interests. If Western governments really want to stop human rights abuses, why not start with Gaza, where people under a forty-four-year occupation are regularly being bombed?

Libya is not Iraq. In some ways it is worse. Because the tragedy of Iraq is still unfolding, and thus we should know better; and because Arabs have shown us how to democratize the Arab world, and it did not involve our bombing them. They've demonstrated that revolutions that bring greater freedom and democracy come from below. They are not imposed by foreigners from 50,000 feet above.

**Gary Younge**

---

**P.S.**

\* March 24, 2011 | This article appeared in the April 11, 2011 edition of The Nation:  
<http://www.thenation.com/article/159449/innocence-liberal-hawk>

\* Gary Younge, the Alfred Knobler Journalism Fellow at The Nation Institute, is the New York correspondent for the Guardian and the author of *No Place Like Home: A Black Briton's Journey Through the Deep South (Mississippi)* and *Stranger in a Strange Land: Travels in the Disunited States* (New Press). He is also a contributor to The Nation.