

Attack on Libya: Why Odyssey Dawn Is Doomed

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Global Research, March 27, 2011

newamericamedia.org 27 March 2011

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

If there's ever been a fateful name for a military operation, it's Odyssey Dawn, the cipher for the ongoing attack on Libya.

The name comes from Homer's epic The Odyssey. In it, a band of Greek warriors led by war hero Odysseus, better known as Ulysses, is on their way home from a hollow victory after the 10-year siege of Troy. The exhausted men seek port on a peninsula poking out of the North African coast. In need of food and water, they send out scouts who don't return. For this is the Land of the Lotus Eaters, where all who enter become forgetful of their responsibilities to family and homeland.

Now, a handful of Western allies – the US, some European nations, the UAE and Qatar – are lost in a similar lotus dream. These brave few are determined to fight for peace, harmony and bliss in a hostile desert where such ideals have never existed. Meanwhile, they are forgetting their own deepening domestic troubles.

Any war that begins as a comedy is sure to end tragically. The first engagement in a "limited action", as described by President Barack Obama, is not being fully revealed in its embarrassing details – the rebel jet that went down in flames was a victim of friendly fire from French Air Force interceptors.

This bullet-in-the-foot was then followed by the launch of 112 Tomahawk cruise missiles from the USS missile ships Stout and Barry as well as from the submarines Florida and Providence. The pro-war politicians justify the foreign intervention as an effort to save lives, though it's obvious that an opening act of a hundred-rocket barrage portends that many more people, including civilians, will die than if the local combatants were left to themselves.

Ulterior Purpose

In Homer's tale, the clear-headed Greek hero orders his delirious scouts against their own wishes to return to their ship for the journey home. Showing a stern attitude similar to the sober Ulysses, many national leaders want nothing to do with the present North Africa escapade, including Angela Merkel of Germany, Manmohan Singh of India, and even former Brazilian leader Lula da Silva.

Tempted by some ulterior purpose – perhaps the desire to seize Libya's oil asserts for themselves – Americans, Britons and the French are finding themselves as comrades in arms with the rebel Islamic Fighting Group, the most radical element in the Al Qaeda network. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton admitted the risks of the unholy alliance in a congressional hearing, saying that the Libyan opposition is probably more anti-American

than Muammar Gaddafi. A decade ago, this very same delusion of a Western-Islamist partnership in Kosovo, Bosnia and Chechnya ended abruptly in the 9/11 attacks.

Confusing Enemy for Ally

Protection for the malcontents, including Al Qaeda militants, holed up in Benghazi is the worst rationale for any intervention in the annals of American history. If this twisted logic was to be transferred to Afghanistan and Iraq, the Marines should be saving Taliban outposts from the Afghan Army or providing security for car-bomb drivers against the Iraqi police.

Since the start of the Afghan war, Osama bin Laden has shifted his strategy away from South Asia toward building a new emirate across North Africa. The trio of regional leaders who refused to pay “protection money” to the resurgent extremists – while others did across the region – and vigorously fought the swelling numbers of terrorists were Muammar Gaddafi, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt and Ben Ali of Tunisia.

The brutality and human-rights violations of their security forces were no worse than what the American military and intelligence operatives were and are still doing in night raids and interrogation sessions. Yet since the start of this year, under Obama’s “Islamic policy” of wooing would-be terrorists, Washington has plotted with sympathizers and supporters of Islamist militancy to overthrow these three guardians of the West.

Making concessions on civil rights with those unfairly accused is reasonable and just, but urging and arming fanatics to attack their governments goes way beyond compromising one’s own values. Yes, Gaddafi is guilty of killing his own citizens, and by that same standard under the law of the British Empire so were George Washington and Abraham Lincoln. Civil wars are sometimes necessary, and foreign powers have absolutely no moral grounds for taking sides.

Some things are hard to say but must be said. The US participation in supporting the Libyan rebels is a grotesque affront to the memory of the Americans and the others killed in the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001. Washington has turned its back on justice for those victims by now backing the fanatics who triggered the past decade of senseless warfare, destruction and fear. The terrorists, as demented and misguided as they are, do not bear the entire blame since it was the belligerent foreign policy and past duplicity of the US that fueled the anger, hatred and endless vendettas.

Navigating the Barbary Coast

For Americans, Libya is a trap, a safe harbor filled with mines, the yawning pit in a sand dune. Oil and oil ports are the bait. This is not the first Libyan misstep for the US military.

The U.S. Navy engaged Tripoli in 1801, starting a four-year misadventure called the First Barbary War or the Tripolitan War. One of the early actions along the pirate coast was the capture of the USS Philadelphia by the Pasha of Tripoli, who then demanded ransom for release of the American crew. In a ploy to retake the frigate, Lt. Stephan Decatur took on the guise of a pirate himself, slipping into harbor in a captured ketch. His infiltration was detected, and the mission ended with Decatur setting fire to the good ship Philadelphia to deny its use by the enemy.

After early setbacks, the American expeditionary force found itself in a precarious position, at high risk of capture or death far from home. Their hit-and-run raids were going nowhere. Relief finally came from a group of foreign mercenaries – Greek, Arab and Berber rogues paid in gold – who marched in from Alexandria, Egypt, to capture the pirate stronghold of Derna.

In recent times, the eastern Libyan city has been a prime Al Qaeda recruiting center for suicide bombers sent against American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Derna is now under the protection of the Western no-fly zone.

The Tripolitan War ended not gloriously, as the Marine hymn suggests, but in an obscure and humiliating truce. As a first step toward world power, the Barbary War exposed the folly and self-deception of imperial dreams.

The sailors of the young American republic were not the last or the first to experience the deceptions and dangers of the Libyan shore. Thousands of years earlier, Greek heroes returning from ravaged Troy were warned against venturing into the Land of the Lotus Eaters because for those who did, there was no going home. That warning echoes down through the ages to this day.

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