

Editorial & Comment

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LIBYA

Blame R2P: The intellectuals go to war

We have entered a new age – the age of humanitarian imperialism



MARGARET WENTE
mwente@globeandmail.com

Why is Canada at war in Libya? You won't get the answer from our elected leaders. They're too busy fighting an election to explain it to us. You can't count on the opposition parties to raise awkward questions, either. They have better things to do at a crucial time like this. Besides, it's just a little war. It will be over soon, unless it isn't. If all goes well, perhaps Canadians won't notice that our political class has committed us to an open-ended military action in North Africa without a clue about what the mission is, who's in charge, or how deep the quagmire might get.

The short answer is that Canada is in Libya because our allies are. But, ideologically, this is very much a made-in-Canada war – rooted in a doctrine that has been tirelessly promoted by foreign policy liberals such as Lloyd Axworthy and Bob Rae, and vigorously endorsed by some of Barack Obama's closest advisers, especially Samantha Power at the National Security Council.

This doctrine is known as the "responsibility to protect" (R2P for short) and was endorsed by the United Nations in 2005. It mandates that the "international

community" is morally obliged to defend people who are in danger of massive human-rights violations. It's rooted in Western guilt over the failure to prevent genocide in Rwanda. R2P is the moral underpinning of the war in Libya, and it's the reason why people such as Paul Martin, Roméo Dallaire, Mr. Rae and Mr. Axworthy have been so amazingly eager for us to rush into battle.

So have Ms. Power and her sister warriors Hillary Clinton, the U.S. Secretary of State, and Susan Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the UN. Together, these three convinced Mr. Obama of the urgent moral case for war in Libya. Ms. Power is the author of the enormously influential book *A Problem from Hell*, about Washington's failure to prevent genocide in the 20th century. Her counterpart in France is the glamorous philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, who flew to Benghazi, met the rebels, and persuaded French President Nicolas Sarkozy (who badly needs a boost in the polls) to back them.

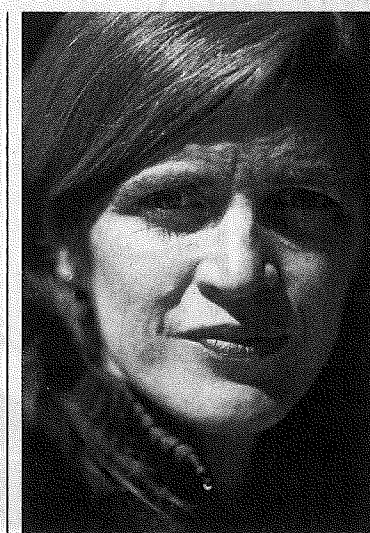
In other words, the war in Libya is a creation of the liberal intellectuals – just as the war in Iraq was a creation of the neo-conservatives. Many of the liberal intellectuals who vigorously opposed the Iraq war have just as vigorously been advocating intervention in Libya. Both groups are serenely convinced of their own moral rightness. Yet, the delusions of the R2P crowd aren't all that different from the delusions of the neo-cons, who thought they could march into Iraq, de-

capitate the dictator, and help the cheering throngs embrace democracy. Has the past decade taught these people nothing?

Evidently not. The other day, I heard Mr. Rae explain that the purpose of the war in Libya is to "create space" so the rebels can get their act together (to do what, he didn't say). This notion of "creating space" is swiped directly from Afghanistan, where we were assured that a more democratic (or at least more Western-friendly) society would emerge once Western forces were able to win over the locals and protect them from the bad guys. How's that working out?

R2Pers aren't just guilty of amnesia. They're also ignorant. They know less about the tribal politics of Libya than they do about the dark side of the moon. To them, all Arab nations look alike. They got so excited about the Arab Awakening that they assumed the rebels in Libya were not much different from the protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square. This hopeful story line has been reinforced by sympathetic Western reporters on the ground, even though they have no idea who the rebels are, either. On closer inspection, it turns out that at least some of them are not too nice. They're happy to round up suspects and use Moammar Gadhafi's former prisons in much the same way he did.

A short, sharp war that ends next week sure would be nice. But it's a lot harder to get off the bus than it is to get on. Last week, the coalition forces swung into



Warrior queen Samantha Power:
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action when Col. Gadhafi's forces were at the gates of Benghazi. They beat them off and, no doubt, saved many lives. Good. Yet, instead of going home, the coalition has decided to explicitly support the rebels on other fronts. When does a limited protective action morph into a war of liberation? As British MP Rory Stewart said, "The lesson of Afghanistan is if you dip your toes in, you are soon in up to your neck."

Right now, it's not clear who's in charge in Libya. The U.S., without which there would be no war, has vowed to eject itself from the driver's seat as soon as possible. After days of bickering, NATO has agreed to take command of the no-fly zone, with a Canadian in charge. Who's in charge of the rest of the operation is TBA. But one thing is clear – this is the West's war now.

We have entered a new age – the age of humanitarian imperialism. Humanitarian imperialists are besotted with fantasies of the West's inherent goodness. As American writer David Rieff puts it, they have promised that, from now on, all wars will "noble wars of altruism." To them, the facts on the ground don't matter much. What really matters is their good intentions.

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