The case of Professor Juan Cole

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1 April 2011

Among the most striking features of the US-NATO onslaught against Libya has been the widespread support that this “war of choice” has evoked among left-liberal parties and the affluent middle-class milieu that comprise an important part of their constituency. Waving the banner of “human rights”—the most hypocritical and deceitful of all justifications for imperialist war—the liberal left embraced this war as their own. One would imagine that this was the first time in history that imperialism had proclaimed the cause of “human rights” and democracy as a cloak for its predatory interests!

The left-liberal justifications for the US-NATO bombing of Libya are thick with moral outrage against Colonel Gaddafi, but provide virtually nothing in the way of analysis of the motives and interests of the forces, within Libya and internationally, that are seeking his overthrow. The apologists argue and write as if they were members of a society of amnesiacs. There is no history. Nothing that occurred in the past is remembered. The morally-debased and genocidal record of imperialist colonialism is ignored. There is no reference in these writings to Italian colonialism’s extermination of nearly one half of the Libyan population during its occupation between 1911 and 1940. Nor do they note that the last major joint Anglo-French military action in North Africa, in October-November 1956, was the invasion of Egypt. That action, carried out in collusion with Israel, sought to overthrow the nationalist regime of another Arab colonel, Gamal Abdul Nasser, and reclaim control of the nationalized Suez Canal. Nasser was widely denounced in the British press as a “mad dog” and Prime Minister Anthony Eden plotted his assassination. The Anglo-French invasion failed because the United States, which had its own plans for the region, would not tolerate the attempt by the European imperialists to restore their colonial empires. President Eisenhower compelled the French, British and Israelis to beat a humiliating retreat.

Those who are hailing the attack on Libya as a triumph for the cause of human rights seem to have no recollection at all of the monstrous role played by the United States in attacking and subverting countries that interfered, in one way or another, with its strategic political and economic interests. It is not only the past that is forgotten (Vietnam, the savage war of the “Contras” in Nicaragua, the fomenting of civil wars in Angola and Mozambique, the overthrow and murder of Lumumba in the Congo, the longstanding support for the Apartheid regime in South Africa, the invasion of Iraq); the present is all but ignored. The pro-war “left” assigns to the United States the task of removing Gaddafi for firing on his people, even as Predator drones rain missiles down upon Afghanistan and Pakistan, killing people every day.

A significant example of the response of left-liberal intellectuals to the war is the statement posted March 27 by University of Michigan Professor Juan Cole on his widely-followed “Informed Comment” blog (http://www.juancole.com) and subsequently reproduced in the Nation. Entitled “An Open Letter to the Left,” Professor Cole, a well-known historian of the Middle East, vociferously defends his support for the attack on Libya.

“I would like to urge the Left to learn to chew gum and walk at the same time,” he writes sarcastically. The problem with the Left, Cole argues, is that it does not know how to adapt its traditional anti-war principles to existing circumstances. He argues that the Left should determine its attitude to wars launched by the United States on “a case-by-case basis. …” It “should avoid making ‘foreign intervention’ an absolute taboo the way the Right makes abortion an absolute taboo if doing so makes us heartless (inflexible a priori positions often lead to heartlessness).” In other words, Cole advocates a pragmatic accommodation with imperialism. “To make ‘anti-imperialism’ trump all other values in a mindless way,” he writes, “leads to frankly absurd positions.”

A significant degree of intellectual confusion, if not dishonesty, is revealed in this remark. “Anti-imperialism” is not a “value”—which must be juggled pragmatically with other values—but a political position that is theoretically grounded in an analysis of the objective economic, social and political structure of global capitalism. Cole seeks to evade such an analysis, which would reveal the essential interests of the capitalist ruling elite that underlie the attack on Libya.

Thus, Cole’s case for war consists entirely of a denunciation of the existing Libyan regime, with his main focus on its crimes, actual and anticipated. “I am unabashedly cheering the liberation movement on and glad that the UNSC [United Nations Security Council]-authorized intervention has saved them from being crushed.” He asserts that without intervention, “Gaddafi would have reestablished himself, with the liberation movement squashed like a bug and the country put back under secret police rule.”

Professor Cole provides no serious analysis of the composition of the “liberation movement,” and derides any reference to Al Qaeda involvement in the protests as “without foundation.” No one familiar with the recent history of Libya, let alone the ongoing conflicts within North Africa and the Middle East, would accept Professor Cole’s judgment on this matter. The activities of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb in Algeria and Libya play a significant role in the politics of the region. The Libyan Islamic Fighting Group (LIFG), considered a branch of Al Qaeda, mounted a major challenge to the Gaddafi regime in the 1990s. The destabilizing impact of that challenge was a major factor in the decision of the Gaddafi regime to abandon its traditional anti-imperialist rhetoric and seek an accommodation with Europe and the United States. As recently as 2007, the Libyan government, according to reports, was bracing for terrorist attacks.

The issue of Al Qaeda’s involvement in the Libyan opposition is, within the context of the US-led “war against terror,” a significant issue—particularly in judging the reasons underlying the US-NATO intervention. It is well known that forces active in the LIFG struggle against Gaddafi in the 1990s who managed to escape Libya after the rebellion’s suppression “began to cooperate more closely with transnational networks outside Libya. Thus all the al-Qaeda field commanders in Afghanistan whose names are currently known are Libyans. Meanwhile, even in Libya itself a substantial recruitment potential for militant Islamists seems to exist.” [“Between the ‘Near’ and the ‘Far’ Enemy: Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb,” by Guido Steinberg and Isabelle Werenfels, Mediterranean Politics, 12: 3, 407-413]

According to this same study, European security agencies “consider al-
Years of Upheaval (Boston: 1982), p. 859

Iranian nuclear program and you leave it helpless and vulnerable to having destroy Hizbullah, and you reduce Iran's strategic depth. Destroy the America's long-term plans:

geostrategic conceptions, Cole offered this perceptive summary of retain the option of military action against Iran, so as to gain access to its Iran. "In a worst case scenario," he warned, "Washington would like to destroy the bodyguard. You don’t kill a bodyguard just to kill the bodyguard. It is phase I of a bigger operation."

Without explaining why, Professor Cole, it appears, has rejected his own analysis. But even though Professor Cole has changed his mind, his writings in 2006 are an effective refutation of his present pro-war position.

If Cole were proceeding as a historian, he would call to his readers' attention that the enmity between Libya and the United States dates from Gaddafi’s decision—shortly after leading the September 1969 coup that overthrow the US-backed regime of King Idris—to substantially increase the price of oil. Until Gaddafi’s radical nationalist regime came to power, OPEC pricing was effectively controlled by the United States through the medium of its Saudi Arabian puppets. The action taken by Gaddafi’s new regime signified that the price of oil had passed out of American control and would be influenced by the political calculations of radical nationalists.

Among the first to recognize the danger posed by this new relation of forces was the CIA’s Dr. Henry Kissinger, the national security advisor (and later secretary of state) in the Nixon administration. As Kissinger recalled in his memoirs, Gaddafi was “an avowed radical” who “set out to extirpate Western influence. He did not care if in the process he weakened the global economy.” [Years of Upheaval (Boston: 1982), p. 859] Kissinger moved into action at once. “In a meeting of November 24, 1969,” he recalled, “I raised the question whether to have the 40 Committee canvass the possibility of covert action.” [Ibid, pp. 859-86] To Kissinger’s chagrin, he was unable to obtain approval at that time. A decade later, however, the Reagan administration, using a terrorist incident in Berlin as a pretext, ordered an air assault on Tripoli in which Gaddafi himself was targeted.

Cole passes over the history of the last 40 years in silence. He says nothing of the crucial role that Libyan oil plays in the strategic calculations of Europe and the United States, although this has been the subject of extensive analysis in scholarly journals devoted to contemporary geo-politics. He neither mentions, nor explains why, “mad dog” Gaddafi was feted by the European Union in Brussels in 2004, Paris in 2007 and Rome in 2009. Or, for that matter, why Gaddafi’s son Moatassem-Bilah al-Gaddafi was welcomed by Hillary Clinton to the State Department in 2009.

One explanation has been given by Professor Derek Lutterbeck and Professor Georgij Engelbrecht, experts on the geo-politics of North Africa. Writing in November 2009, they noted that Libya “now finds itself at the intersection between Western and Russian energy interests…” In an analysis that substantiates the arguments advanced by Cole in 2006, they call attention to Western concerns about Libya’s intentions in relation to efforts by Russia to secure access to its vast oil and natural gas reserves. ["The West and Russia in the Mediterranean: Towards a Renewed Rivalry,” Mediterranean Politics, 14; 3, 385-406]

States have long memories and operate with extended time lines. For the United States and Europe, the disturbances in Libya that broke out in February provided an opportunity to rid themselves of a political and economic irritant that had undermined their control of the global oil

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market over the last 40 years. Under the cover of popular movements for
democracy and social transformation in neighboring Egypt and Tunisia,
the United States and Europe moved to overthrow Gaddafi. Despite the
fact that Gaddafi had desperately curried favor with the imperialist powers
for the past decade, and entered into close economic and security
relations, Washington, London and Paris decided that they would replace
him with a full-fledged puppet colonial-style regime in Tripoli, and turn
the clock 42 years. Thus, whatever the aims of the initial waves of popular
protest in Benghazi, the movement was quickly taken under the wing of
the imperialist powers. Its agents sought to encourage military-style
confrontations with the regime that would provide a “human rights”
pretext for the US-NATO intervention. This is a scenario that has been
used by imperialism to great effect many times in the past.

Forgetting history, repudiating what he wrote yesterday and ignoring
contemporary geo-strategic and class issues, Professor Cole’s writing
gives the impression of a man who has completely lost his bearings. In a
subsequent blog, posted on March 30, he writes: “If NATO needs me, I’m
there.”

It is a shame that Professor Cole, a distinguished scholar, cannot think of
a more worthy cause to which to devote his life.

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