

# New York Times hails “humanitarian” war in Libya

Bill Van Auken  
5 September 2011

In back-to-back pieces by its leading columnists last week, the *New York Times* proclaimed NATO’s war in Libya as a new model for “humanitarian” interventionism.

With fighting in Libya continuing, the *Times*, like the rest of the US mass media, has rushed to proclaim the war over and “mission accomplished.” This is made explicit in the headline of an August 29 column written by the *Times*’ chief foreign affairs columnist Roger Cohen: “Score one for interventionism”.

Cohen, who has churned out propaganda pieces in favor of US interventions from the Balkans in the 1990s, to the Iraq war, to the destabilization efforts in Iran, confesses that he is an interventionist and “like many of my generation” became one over Bosnia.

There is an element of truth in this, but one must hasten to add that he speaks not for an entire generation, but rather a very definite sociopolitical layer within it. It consists of former left-liberals and ex-radicals who, having been to some extent radicalized by the Vietnam War, had, twenty years on, found themselves driven toward an accommodation with imperialism.

They were impelled by powerful class pressures, not least of which was the social polarization that divided sections of the better-off petty bourgeoisie ever more sharply from the masses of working people. Finding comfortable positions as academics, better-paid journalists and professionals of various stripes, they came to identify their own interests more and more with those of the financial aristocracy. At the same time, the self-liquidation of the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy, upon whose apparent strength the leftism of not a few in this layer rested, played a significant role.

In Bosnia, this layer found a cause that allowed them to “come home again.” They willfully ignored the role that US, German and British imperialism had played in provoking the breakup of Yugoslavia and then exploiting

this breakup for their own ends. And they were indifferent to all acts of ethnic cleansing and crimes against civilians other than those carried out by Serbs against Bosnian Muslims. On this basis they supported the US-NATO air war and occupation in Bosnia as a moral crusade, supposedly having nothing to do with US geostrategic interests.

Cohen goes on to argue that not a few prominent liberals—he cites the case of historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr.—had wrongly opposed US intervention in Bosnia because they viewed it “through the prism of Vietnam.” He adds, however, that after the US wars in the Balkans, “The pendulum had swung. Vietnam-induced caution had given way to Bosnian-induced hubris.” This supposedly explains why a layer of erstwhile liberals backed the Bush administration’s criminal war in Iraq.

“I, too, fell under its influence,” he writes cynically. “Mea culpa.”

Now supposedly, the pendulum has swung back again. The Libyan war was another moral war, indispensable for stopping “a massacre foretold in Benghazi.”

This is an argument shot full of dishonesty. The US and NATO did not go to war to protect the population of Benghazi. As is now obvious, it set about to smash Gaddafi’s forces from the air and to organize and arm a rebel army on the ground for the purpose of regime change. The aim was to install a puppet government controlled by Washington, its NATO allies and the Western oil corporations.

Reeking with deceit, Cohen doesn’t even bother to explain how he changed his position from last March, when he argued against an intervention in Libya based on the “bitter experience of Iraq” and the “importance of these Arab liberation movements being homegrown.” The answer is simple: the line at the White House, the CIA and the Pentagon changed, and his opinions made the necessary adjustments.

Now he writes that he is “glad I resisted that temptation” to view Libya through the prism of Iraq. “Another cycle has begun.” So threadbare is the logic here that Cohen doesn’t even bother to contemplate where the pendulum is now heading or whether the triumphalism that he and the *Times* are attempting to generate over Libya will help prepare the next and more catastrophic war.

He concludes by affirming: “In the end, I think interventionism is inextricable from the American idea... the idea that the West must be prepared to fight for its values against barbarism is the best hope for a 21<sup>st</sup> century less cruel than the 20<sup>th</sup>.”

As Trotsky scathingly observed in 1924, “America is always liberating somebody; that’s her profession.”

Following up this wretched column was another, two days later, by *Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof, titled “Thank you America!”, in which he revels in his experience in Tripoli.

He writes: “Americans are not often heroes in the Arab world, but as nonstop celebrations unfold here in the Libyan capital I keep running into ordinary people who learn where I’m from and then fervently repeat variants of the same phrase: ‘Thank you, America!’”

Not often, perhaps, but is Kristof suffering from amnesia? Little more than eight years ago his newspaper breathlessly reported on celebrations and gratitude to Washington in the streets of Baghdad, after an invasion that ultimately led to over a million Iraqi deaths and the destruction of an entire society.

In an April 10, 2003 editorial entitled “The fall of Baghdad”, the *Times* wrote of about how “citizens streamed into the streets to celebrate” and “jubilant Iraqis and American marines collaborated in toppling a huge statue of Mr. Hussein.” It predicted that this moment—followed by years of horrific warfare and the killing of more than 4,000 troops—“signaled that a complete American military victory in Iraq may be achieved within a matter of days, not months.”

Kristof paints a rosy portrait of post-Gaddafi Tripoli, claiming that there is “no looting” and “little apparent retaliation.” Presumably, he heard nothing of the bound corpses of Gaddafi loyalists found in various parts of the capital and passed up a visit to the “rebels” detention centers, where one-third to one-half of those rounded up are black sub-Saharan African migrants, pulled off the streets and brutalized because of the color of their skin.

“Libya,” writes Kristof, “is a reminder that sometimes it is possible to use military tools to advance humanitarian

causes.” The lesson of Libya, he claims, is that it “is better to inconsistently save some lives than to consistently save none.”

This last pearl of wisdom is meant to ward off any inconvenient questions as to why the Obama administration and its NATO allies were determined to uphold humanitarian values in Libya via regime change, while continuing to prop up repressive regimes in Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere.

The answer that it was out to “inconsistently save some lives” is unadulterated bunk. The NATO-backed National Transitional Council estimates that 50,000 Libyans died in the war that the US and its allies imposed on Libya, many times more lives lost than have ever been ascribed to pre-war repression.

The reality is that an inexhaustible supply of pretexts can always be found for a “humanitarian” intervention in one or another oppressed country. The decision to do so is not calculated on the basis of lives to be saved—as the wars almost always produce far more deaths than they prevent—but on the benefits that may be achieved.

On this basis, Libya—a nation of barely six million people, sitting atop the largest petroleum reserves in Africa—was judged to be low-hanging fruit, ripe for a colonial-style takeover. Within weeks of the fall of the US-backed regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, Washington and its NATO allies moved to exploit and hijack the protests in Libya to advance their own predatory interests in the region.

And the supposedly liberal columnists of the *New York Times* tailored their views to fit Washington’s and NATO’s war aims.

In reading these corrupt and thoroughly dishonest columns, one is hard-pressed to determine which is worse, the gross stupidity of the arguments or their abject groveling to imperialism.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**