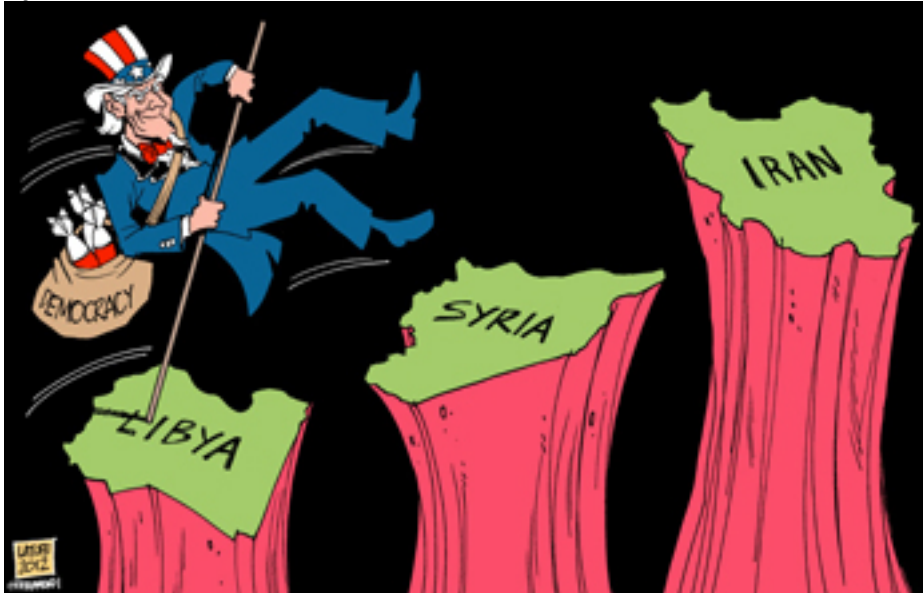


Choose Your Weapon: Military Metaphor

By Carol Masters



As peacemakers, we try to avoid militaristic language and metaphor when it nudges or bullies its way into everyday speech: call the shots, spearhead the discussion, attack an argument, look daggers, choose ammunition for a campaign. Such metaphors are borrowed from the “excitement” of military life to enliven common speech and as such may or may not be harmless. Conversely, military metaphorical transformation of the ordinary often has a hateful, even inhuman objective: “light up” human beings, or referring to an Afghan woman in traditional dress as a “bullet.” The culture critic, Cynthia Haven, decries the use of war itself in a metaphor (war on women, war on terror). Such usage, she says, is a marketing tool, intended to manufacture outrage. War is a bloody, grievous, scarifying evil, and it is dishonest and manipulative to adopt it as a buzzword. Her argument is that “the word should be reserved for the real thing.”¹

As an aside, Haven references past conflicts when wars were given other names to cleanse them of objectionable policy implications: “Vietnam wasn’t a war but a ‘police action.’” That label also has been given to the Korean War, military incursions into Iraq and Afghanistan, and drone attacks on Pakistan. Secretary Gates called Libya a “limited kinetic action,” whatever that might be.²

Whether it is euphemistic, militaristic, or manipulative, we need to pay attention to the language of policy makers as it acquires authoritative standing. Policy language is of great consequence – especially when it is crafted to prepare us for war. Spit and shine phrases are kitted out with care to make their appearance on The News Hour or whatever communication venue policy makers have chosen to manufacture

public approval. The Responsibility to Protect is one such formula currently used to appeal to public emotions and U.S. self-understandings or delusions.

Clinton and R2P



Mary Beaudoin of Women Against Military Madness points out in “The Myth of Humanitarian Intervention” (WAMM Today, May 17, 2012), the concept Responsibility to Protect (R2P) has been given broad sanction by western powers and their allies after a relatively short history as an “emerging” international norm. At the 2005 World Summit of the United Nations (High-Level Plenary Meeting), an initiative was introduced that called for all governments to accept responsibility to protect populations from acts of atrocity: genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. One hundred thirty-three countries objected because the model undermined the concept of the sovereign nation-state and provided a rationale for stronger nations to interfere with weaker ones. The danger to weaker nations was most evident in that R2P asked for the willingness to use collective action through the Security Council “when peaceful means prove inadequate and national authorities are manifestly failing to do so.” In other words, it gave the green light for the use of military force.

Samantha Power is usually credited with, if not the invention, at least the popularization of the doctrine in her 2002 book *A Problem From Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*. After reporting during the Bosnian conflict, she has for many years been a champion of military interventions to guard against genocide. She was considered, along with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and U.S. Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice, to be an important voice in the Obama administration calling for the president to intervene militarily in Libya. President Obama named her as chair to the newly established Atrocities Prevention Board, whose goal is to formally recognize that genocide and other mass atrocities committed by foreign powers are a “core national security interest and core moral responsibility.” It’s worth noticing which “core” is listed first.

While Power’s relationship with Hillary Clinton has not always been smooth—her criticisms of Clinton during the 2008 campaign led to her resignation—their united focus on the “humanitarian” basis for U.S. military dominance is laser-like. R2P is a rallying cry for leaders who need to justify a probably bloody intervention and a public who wants to believe it is necessary.

Hillary Clinton used the phrase long before it was introduced at the United Nations World Summit. In an address to the Beijing Women’s Conference in 1995,³ she stressed that the conference’s goals, to strengthen societies and empower women, could not be met unless all governments “accept their responsibility to protect and promote internationally recognized human rights.” No doubt her reference to human rights was intentional, a broad diplomatic hint to the host country.

The moral tone was undercut, ironically, during her presidential campaign when she promised to “operationalize” the responsibility-to-protect doctrine and “adopt a policy that recognizes the prevention of mass atrocities as an important national security interest of the United States, not just a humanitarian goal.”⁴ Her caveat suggests that U.S. interests, not human lives, should take primary place in foreign policy.



Collage of words from presidents’ speeches.
—New York Times

Edward Luck, appointed Special Advisor on the Responsibility to Protect by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon, stresses that the strength of R2P is its “capacity to move and inspire people, and, over time, even governments and international organizations. It will require discipline and vigilance to ensure that asset does not

become a liability.”⁵ Lots of controversy still exists about the doctrine among commentators. On the conservative side, think tanks warn that the U.S may compromise its own national sovereignty by intervening in another nation’s conflicts, and that the only test for involvement should be our national interest. Supporters argue that interventions are not to be carried out unilaterally, but by the “international community.” But the United States and its allies use “international community” to designate themselves and whoever agrees with them at the time. Might the concept be a covering rubric for imperialism or neo-colonialism?

In the run-up to the attacks on Libya, Obama ultimately sided with Clinton and those like Powers and Rice pushing R2P—over the objections of others in his administration. And in the Syrian crisis, it is clear that Clinton’s and Power’s influence will be felt.

In mid-May, the Washington Post reported that Syrian rebels have begun receiving significantly more and better weapons in recent weeks, which includes antitank weaponry, “an effort paid for by Persian Gulf nations and coordinated in part by the United States, according to opposition activists and U.S. and foreign officials.” Obama administration officials said that the United States is not supplying the lethal material, but “has expanded contacts with opposition military forces to provide the gulf nations with assessments of rebel credibility and command-and-control infrastructure.”

No matter which words you chose to disguise it with, war by any other name is still war.

1 Cynthia Haven, Orwell Watch #19 “End the War” <http://bookhaven.stanford.edu/2012/04/orwell-watch-19-end-the-war/>

2 Doug Bandow, “The Libyan Itty-Bitty, Kind of, Sort of, Quasi War,” The National Interest, Special Issue, May 24, 2011

3 <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/hillaryclintonbeijingspeech.htm>

4 Amitai Etzioni, Foreign Affairs, November/December 2011, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/136548/amitai-etzioni-g-john-ikenberry/point-of-order>

5 Edward Luck, Freedom from Fear Magazine, “The Responsibility to Protect Whom from What?” May 22, 2012 <http://www.freedomfromfearmagazine.org>

6 Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, Washington Post, May 15, 2012

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Davidov, *Nonviolent Revolutionary*” with Marv Davidov, Nodin Press, Minneapolis, 2009.