Is It Better to Save No One? New York Times Nicholas D. Kristof 2 April 2011   Critics from left and right are jumping all over President Obama for his Libyan intervention, arguing that we don't have an exit plan, that he hasn't articulated a grand strategy, that our objectives are fuzzy, that Islamists could gain strength. And those critics are all right.

But let's back up a moment and recognize a larger point: Mr. Obama and other world leaders did something truly extraordinary, wonderful and rare: they ordered a humanitarian intervention that saved thousands of lives and that even Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi's closest aides seem to think will lead to his ouster.

We were all moved by E
man al-Obeidy
, the woman who burst into the reporters' hotel in Tripoli with her story of gang-rape and torture, only to be dragged away by security goons. If we had not intervened in Libya, Qaddafi forces would have reached Benghazi and there might have been thousands of Eman al-Obeidys.

It has been exceptionally rare for major powers to intervene militarily for predominantly humanitarian reasons. One rare example was the United States-led Kosovo campaign in 1999, and another was Britain's dispatch of troops to Sierra Leone in 2000 to end the brutal civil war there. Both were successes, but came only after years of killings that gradually built up the political will to do something.

Critics argue that we are inconsistent, even hypocritical, in our military interventions. After all, we intervened promptly this time in a country with oil, while we have largely ignored Ivory Coast and Darfur — not to mention Yemen, Syria and Bahrain.

We may as well plead guilty. We are inconsistent. There's no doubt that we cherry-pick our humanitarian interventions.

But just because we allowed Rwandans or Darfuris to be massacred, does it really follow that to be consistent we should allow Libyans to be massacred as well? Isn't it better to inconsistently save some lives than to consistently save none?

If the Libya operation is successful, moreover, it may help put teeth into the emerging doctrine of the
"responsibility to protect"
— a landmark notion in international law that countries must intervene to prevent mass atrocities. And that might help avert the next Rwanda or the next Darfur. (...)

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