

There's nothing good about the war in Libya

Spiked David Chandler 19 April 2011 *David Chandler is Professor of International Relations at the University of Westminster, London. He is the editor of the Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding and has written widely in this area.*

(...)We can never return to the 1990s world of humanitarian intervention. This isn't because of the 'bad wars' of the war on terror. Rather, well before 9/11, the retreat from the conceptual conflict between intervention and sovereignty had already begun with the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty establishing the conception of the

Responsibility to protect

(
R2P
) in the year 2000. In this, the commission suggested that the 'clash of rights' – those of intervention and of sovereignty – had been a product of misunderstanding. (...)

The conceptual development of the

R2P

enabled a 'Third Way' approach to international regulation, between non-intervention (and the respect for state sovereignty) and international intervention (and the assumption of international sovereign responsibility). Instead, the line between external intervention and domestic sovereignty was blurred through the focus on the ethical (rather than legal)

responsibility to protect

, which denied any clash between the legal and political rights of intervention and sovereignty.

Proof of this third-way approach was the rise and rise of international statebuilding. That is, international intervention was now seen as necessary to build or to construct sovereign capacities. In a world in which intervention was now premised on the need to build sovereignty – to state-build – intervention and sovereignty had become synonyms rather than antonyms.

In today's world, the bombing of Libya cannot readily be grasped in the traditional terms of the state interests of

Realpolitik

or of an emerging global cosmopolitanism of human security. It now seems clear that the 1990s were the highpoint of the discipline of international relations, with the political stakes of humanitarian intervention understood as posing the choice between two liberal worlds: the political and legal ordering either of the international or the global. In 2011, the debate over the 'humanitarian' bombing of Libya demonstrates that we have moved beyond the liberal political binaries of the international and the global.

This is humanitarian intervention but without the political or legal framework of meaning of the 1990s. The claim of the interveners does not derive from any global ethical assumption of duty or right (in fact, the bombing campaign has the state-based international legal sanction of the

UN Security Council). More importantly, the Libya campaign does not present the 'humanitarian' bombing as an undermining or rolling back of state sovereignty. Instead it is posed in the post-humanitarian language of capacity-building and good governance, allegedly strengthening the Libyan state through enabling the forces of democracy (anyway, those supporting the disparate opposition forces) to strengthen their influence.

The 'good wars' of humanitarian intervention versus state sovereignty of the 1990s ended in the international protectorates, still ongoing in Bosnia and Kosovo. NATO action in Libya may involve dropping 'humanitarian' bombs but, unlike in Kosovo or Bosnia, there will be no assumption of Western responsibility for their outcome. In this respect, the bombing campaign much more resembles those of Afghanistan and Iraq, where there was similarly little strategic concern with what happened afterwards. While there is no chance of Libya becoming a Kosovo-style 'good war', there is every possibility that international powers will be drawn into the sort of mess that was created by the 'bad wars' of Afghanistan and Iraq.

See
[full article](#)