

The Libya Intervention: 'Dying the Truth Along' Huffingtonpost.com Bill Schulz 13 April 2011 *Bill*

Schulz is President of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and former Executive Director of Amnesty International USA.

As we enter the third week of U.N.-authorized military action in Libya, it behooves us to reflect on the larger implications of unfolding events there. I have been watching those events with a combination of trepidation and restrained applause -- trepidation, of course, because people are losing their lives and one of the world's most maniacal autocrats remains in power, and applause because what has happened represents a milestone in the worldwide struggle for human rights. But this applause is restrained because trying to do good almost always risks dirty hands, and we rarely know the full consequences of our soiled beneficence ahead of time.

When the United Nations was founded in 1945, it affirmed in its charter the sovereign authority of every member state and pledged that it would not interfere with how governments dealt with their own residents. The United Nations was designed to stop wars between nations, not within them.

But in 2005 the United Nations did a remarkable thing. Thanks in part to their failure to act in 1994 to stop the Rwandan genocide, the U.N. General Assembly voted to adopt the principle of the "

responsibility to protect

," popularly known as

R2P

. What

R2P

says is that if a government is committing mass atrocities against its own people, the international community has a responsibility, a positive moral obligation, to intervene. Such intervention must meet certain conditions: it must come as a last resort; it must not reflect ulterior motives; it must use force proportional to the humanitarian goals to be achieved -- but it must happen.

Not surprisingly, since 2005 the United Nations has repeatedly managed to ignore or give short shrift to its self-proclaimed responsibility in places like Somalia, Darfur and Congo. Moreover, the U.S. intervention in Iraq, with all its misdirection and suspect motives, effectively sidelined the country best equipped to conduct humanitarian military interventions from shouldering its duty.

But now comes Libya and -- thanks to political cover provided by the Arab League; successful revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt; the fact that Libya is not vital to the national interests of either Russia and China, who therefore withheld their vetoes in the Security Council; and the fact that no one on the international stage likes Muammar Gaddafi -- the United Nations has managed for the first time to act decisively to enforce

R2P

.

Will this set a precedent? Probably not. The international community and the United States itself are adept at figuring out reasons why

R2P

does not apply in places like Yemen or Bahrain or Syria. But will this Libya action be a warning to other tyrants who may be inclined to commit mass atrocities against their own people? Even if Gaddafi is not removed from power -- and, after all, it is the

responsibility to protect

, not to overthrow; it does not require that all governments be transformed into Norway -- Gaddafi has suffered grievous blows, to his military, to his prestige and to the aura of respectability he had worked so hard to polish. That sends a clear signal to others to think twice before following his path.

Let's put all this, then, in a larger context. Human rights do not depend upon consistent enforcement for their effectiveness, because there is no international sheriff to ensure that human rights laws are abided by. They depend upon gradually shifting values, shifting standards of what constitutes civilized behavior. (...)

(...)At the end of the day, that is the significance of the intervention in Libya -- it is one more intentional, if imperfect, step toward the creation of world that is more respectful of human rights. Do we all wish it could have happened without warfare? Of course, and when international judicial accountability is finally in place someday, it may. But in the meantime, we can take comfort in those fits and starts -- the slow and agonizing but relentless process of what someone once called "dying the truth along."

See full
[article](#)