

THE INTERVENTION BUBBLE CYCLE

Written by Harvey M. Sapolsky

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HARVEY M. SAPOLSKY, MAR 24 2011

There is a cycle developing in American post Cold War foreign policy that is not very different from a financial investment cycle. First, there is a cautious military action which, if successful, leads quickly to the hubris of distant military interventions, which then produces over-reach and disaster, the bubble and the burst if you will, and finally, the resolve into timidity. We saw it in the caution that led to a very rapid end to the successful Gulf War, a success that encouraged the disastrous intervention in Somalia and then to the timidity that followed in the face of the Rwandan genocide, one of the periodic Haitian crises, and the murderous disintegration of Yugoslavia. That was the first cycle that marks the 1990s. Cycle two, which began with the relatively cautious initial action in Afghanistan that came as a result of the 9/11 attacks, is just ending. The initial success in Afghanistan encouraged the hubris that led to the disastrous Iraq War and a deeper, ever more frustrating involvement in Afghanistan. Now we are seeing American timidity in Libya despite the hope of many that America will intervene to save a faltering revolution.

American presidents have choices others lack. American military capabilities are such that almost any global action is possible, no matter how costly and/or unwise. Domestic political circumstance, not need, dictates the search for allies and any quest for international approval. Many nations possess some important measure of military power, but few can or will use this power far from their boundaries without NATO or UN sanction. In contrast, international support is an obstacle to be ignored or sought by a president depending on how determined the president is to wield American military power. If he wants to make it harder, he seeks the UN endorsement.

With America's two current wars far from being over, the reluctance of President Obama to order a No-Fly Zone over Libya was understandable. He resisted the call to arms and insisted on European and Arab involvement and UN authorization. Going beyond the No-Fly-Zone seems totally impossible. Ground forces have already been ruled out for certain. President Obama's own Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, has blocked the road to another major US Army deployment by recently saying that any president who orders a ground war in Asia or Africa needs to have his head examined. The Iraq/Afghanistan Syndrome has taken hold. But if things work out in Libya—if the war is short and relatively cost free, if air power works magically as many politicians hope—expect the hubris to return. Soon we will be trying again to exercise our power as “the global force for good.” Presidential caution is a fleeting thing. Being told that American military power can make a near costless difference to advance the cause of democracy and save humanity from tyrants, presidents are easily tempted to intervene far from home and American interest. In this sense, they are like the foolish investors in financial bubbles. They never totally learn.

About the author:

Harvey M. Sapolsky is Professor of Public Policy and Organization, Emeritus, at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and former Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. He has been a visiting professor at the University of Michigan and the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. In the defense field he has served as a consultant or panel member for a number of government commissions and study groups. His most recent books are *US Defense Politics* written with Eugene Gholz and Caitlin Talmadge and *US Military Innovation Since the Cold War* edited with Benjamin Friedman and Brendan Green, both published by Routledge.

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