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From: Lanny Davis <ldavis@lannyjdavis.com>
Sent: Thursday, March 31, 2011 4:25 PM
To: H
Subject: The Obama-Clinton Team on Libya: Right in the Crossfire

March 31, 2011

Purple Nation

The Obama-Clinton Team on Libya: Right in the Crossfire

By Lanny J. Davis

<http://thehill.com/opinion/columnists/lanny-davis/152903-obama-clinton-team-on-libya-right-in-the-crossfire->

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lanny-davis/the-obamaclinton-team-on- b 842778.html>

<http://dailycaller.com/2011/03/31/the-obama-clinton-team-on-libya-right-in-the-crossfire/>

Both President Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton asked the key question when explaining the administration's Libyan military intervention decision — the secretary of State on Sunday morning news shows, the president on Monday night in his nationally televised speech.

So far, among the various critics on all sides of the spectrum, no one has yet answered the question:

Just suppose that Gadhafi had slaughtered tens of thousands of people in Benghazi and hundreds of thousands had fled over the border to Egypt, destabilizing Egypt and creating a humanitarian crisis — and we had done nothing. Would the critics have criticized the administration?

My answer: The human-rights/humanitarian-values left and the political right who supported President George W. Bush's take out of Saddam Hussein would have united in outrage and finger-pointing at the Obama administration's "paralysis" or "indifference" to slaughter of innocents.

But somehow, in a short period of time, President Obama and his steady and effective secretary of State managed to accomplish the following:

- a resolution of support for the intervention from the United Nations;
- support from the Arab League for a no-fly zone to stop Gadhafi from slaughtering his own people;
- a statement from the African Union supporting democracy in Libya;
- and, within a week, a complete handoff to the NATO command in Europe (despite signs of usual European infighting) — not to mention that the intervention, at least as of now, appears to have been almost instantaneously effective.

And yet, even after a good speech Monday night, the criticism continued from all sides. While much of it was inherently contradictory, most centered on two complaints: the lack of clarity and the lack of consultation with Congress.

Yes, some of the president's goals seem ambiguous and questions remain unanswered.

Is this about regime change or not? Unclear. What happens if Gadhafi remains in power, albeit even if it is just in Tripoli and the eastern region? Also unclear. Will he turn to al Qaeda or other radical Islamic terrorist organizations, using his oil revenues against the West, specifically against the U.S.? Unlikely, but he remains a rogue lunatic with billions of dollars gushing out of the ground every week.

Well, I wish these answers were clear and there were no ambiguity when it comes to a decision to use America's military and put our servicemen and -women at risk. But Obama isn't afraid to face policy ambiguities at times — life, the world, most things, are not all that clear-cut, and certainly most decisions that come to his desk, as he has pointed out, are close calls.

The absence of more thorough consultations with Congress does raise legitimate questions.

The president certainly had enough time to do more than brief the leadership of both chambers. At the very least, he could have used Vice President Biden to do more — such as calls to many of his former Senate colleagues and calls or personal meetings with the Senate Foreign Relations and the House International Relations committees. (By the way, where is Joe Biden? I haven't him speaking out on Libya — I may have missed it, but am I wrong? Why haven't the media noticed this? Maybe I'm wrong.)

But let's face it — there is an inevitable “no win” aspect to the “failure to consult” criticism, too. Had President Obama done all the consulting Congress would have wanted, I can easily imagine the left and right finding a way to agree that he didn't listen to their advice.

In the final analysis, this was a triumph of one of the great presidential-secretary of State combinations in U.S. history — certainly comparable to another powerful “team of rivals,” Abraham Lincoln and William Seward.

Together, President Obama and Hillary Clinton clearly command the great center of American politics — meaning they suffer the slings and arrows of the left and right no matter what they do.

They must be doing something right.

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Mr. Davis is the principal in the Washington D.C. law firm of Lanny J. Davis & Associates, which specializes in strategic crisis management and is a partner with Josh Block in the strategic communications and public affairs company Davis-Block. He served as President Clinton's Special Counsel in 1996-98 and as a member of President Bush's Privacy and Civil Liberties Oversight Board in 2006-07. He is the author of “Scandal: How ‘Gotcha’ Politics Is Destroying America” (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

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