

The drums of (possibly congressionally authorized) war

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

September 3, 2013

This weekend President Obama surprised everyone by [choosing to seek permission now rather than forgiveness later on the Syria front](#). While [the congressional leadership quickly got behind Obama's plan for a military strike](#), it'll be [a harder sell for others](#) on both sides of the aisle.

[James Fallows is impressed](#) with Obama's decision to go to Congress. So, presumably, are the almost 40,000 people who signed [this MoveOn petition](#). And sure: if your main concern is (1) constitutionality, (2) the growing power of the executive branch, and/or (3) legislators' ability to make a lot of noise about (1) and (2) without having to actually record a vote one way or the other, then this is welcome news.

But as always, it's tempting to [let the politics on this side of the world overshadow the death and destruction on that side](#). Waiting for congressional authorization is good. Better still: *not* pursuing nebulous and unlikely goals via deadly, expensive missiles that are all too concrete.

Last year, Steven Cook [called for intervention in Syria](#), arguing that the situation was not as different from Libya as anti-interventionists insisted. Now [he's changed his mind](#): the situation in Syria has deteriorated so much that intervention "would advance Syria's dissolution."

But even if the comparison to Libya still holds, the intervention in Libya was not the unqualified success we've often heard about, as [Freddie deBoer explains](#). Writing from liberal interventionists' left flank, deBoer aims to expose the limited value of their good intentions; R. R. Reno [does the same from the right](#). They're both correct. [As this n+1 editorial](#)—reposted from the time of the intervention in Libya—puts it, "that there has never been a successful humanitarian intervention does not mean that there cannot be one in the future. But the evidence is piling up."

Of course, [the Obama administration isn't calling this a humanitarian intervention](#). We're not considering missile strikes to protect Syrian people; we're doing it to

punish Assad for using chemical weapons and to enforce the international norm against their use. But this isn't as simple as it sounds, either. [William Polk argues](#) that chemical weapons are everywhere and their use isn't as rare as we think. And [Richard Price is skeptical that Assad has eroded the anti-CW norm](#):

Norms trudge on, despite violations, because of beliefs about reciprocity and decency. One violation does not destroy a norm. What matters is how people respond to it.

And you'll notice something strange about this episode. It's not as if Syria is defending their use of chemical weapons. They're denying it. And that helps contribute to the notion this is an unacceptable process. In World War I, the Germans argued that gas might be more humane than bayonets or getting blown up. Some people think that the Bush administration's view on enhanced interrogation techniques struck a real blow against norms against torture. No one is defending chemical warfare.

I think [David Cortright's right](#): instead of violently inserting itself into a complex civil war, the U.S. should stick with diplomacy. But it's hard to be optimistic. Whether or not Obama gets his congressional authorization, Washington's war drums are striking that familiar, relentless beat. Kevin Drum [sums it up well](#):

As near as I can tell, after five years Obama has been entirely captured by the national security establishment. It's a damn shame. The elite consensus on overseas intervention—and national security more broadly—desperately needed to be challenged after a decade of the Bush/Cheney administration, but after a few nods in the right direction during his early days, he's mostly just caved in to it. What a wasted opportunity.