

Opposition to the Libyan Intervention among the American Public

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Using submissions to internet fora as data, this essay explores arguments members of the American public used to oppose the US intervention in Libya. Beyond revealing the various types of oppositional arguments that were employed, examination of these arguments suggests reasons, in addition to institutional obstacles, why the opposition may have had little effect on the federal government's decisions to engage in this and similar interventions. Those additional explanatory factors are the fragmentary nature of the opposition and the deployment of non-mainstream arguments that allow political figures to ignore the opposition as politically marginal.

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Introduction

What arguments did members of the American public use to oppose the Libyan Intervention in the spring of 2011? What was their nature and character? Do those arguments represent the type of practical opposition to war that Kant predicted when he discussed democratic peace theory (DPT)? Or did the opposition use other types of arguments? What can we learn from these arguments regarding the general inability of contemporary anti-war sentiment to restrain the US government from intervening militarily abroad?

These questions are important for two reasons. First, there is an increasingly high level of opposition to interventions among the American public, as evidenced by reaction to this intervention as well as by the recent debate regarding Syria. Opposition to intervention was higher before US activities in Libya than before the onset of the Second Gulf War. Most polls found the public generally split on the latter intervention, as compared to a majority that supported the war against Saddam Hussein in 2003. Moreover, the public never was in favor of inserting ground troops or embarking on a nation-building exercise in Libya.¹ Yet

1 In the contemporaneous AP-GfK poll, 64% of those surveyed opposed the project of democracy building and 78% opposed sending of troops to Libya; in the CNN poll, 70% opposed the sending of ground troops; in the Fox poll, 68% opposed direct military involvement. AP-GfK Poll, Pew Research Center, March 30-April 3, 2011; USA Today/Gallup Poll, March 25-27, 2011; CBS News Poll, March 2011; CNN/Opinion Research Corporation Poll, March 18-20, 2011; Fox News Poll conducted by Anderson Robbins Research and Shaw

we know little about how that opposition was voiced. The most relevant polling reported that among those questioned who opposed the intervention, 54% opposed it on the grounds that the military was already overcommitted. However, this finding was based on responses to a closed-ended question; thus, we do not know whether those responses reflect the actual arguments members of the public truly believed.²

Second, the ineffectiveness of the opposition requires explanation. In its origins in Kant's essay "Perpetual Peace," DPT holds that democracies will be less likely to engage in military ventures than autocratic states because the public, which is empowered in democracies, is generally unwilling to pay the price of military conflicts in treasure and blood. The constraints constructed by popular responsibility (importantly in the form of electoral pressures) will allow the public's practical objections to restrain leaders. Yet, later scholarship has noted that democracies can also be belligerent towards non-democracies.³ Some explanations for this phenomenon have importantly focused on the nature of democratic constraints and the institutional and

& Company Research, March 14-16, 2011. For polling results for the Second Gulf War, see Steve Chan and William Safran, "Public Opinion as a Constraint Against War: Democracies' Response to Operation Democratic Freedom," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 2, Issue 2, April 2006, p. 141.

2 "Public Wary of Military Intervention in Libya," Pew Research Center, March 14, 2011, report of poll conducted from March 10-13, 2011, Questions 7 and 8 <http://www.people-press.org/question-search/?qid=1781920&pid=51&ccid=51#top> (retrieved October 3, 2012).

3 For example, Michael Doyle, "Kant, Liberal Legacies, and Foreign Affairs," *Part I, Philosophy and Public Affairs* 12 (Summer/Fall 1983).

electoral systems through which officials are held responsible. Of particular importance is the argument of Chan and Safran that a significant factor in the failure of the domestic opposition to the Second Gulf War to influence government policy has to do with the inability of America's fragmented, majoritarian electoral system faithfully to reflect public opinion.⁴ But might there be more to this political explanation? Opposition to proposed government policies has been successful in other contexts, the failure of stricter gun control legislation being a case in point. Moreover, one could argue that the institutional nature of the US system, with its systems of checks and balances, provides many opportunities for even minorities to block action. Institutional explanations alone appear to be underdetermining, forcing us to look elsewhere for additional explanations. Could the nature of the arguments opposing military interventions provide us with clues regarding such explanations? In particular, if oppositional arguments deviate from the types of arguments classical DPT predicts, might we identify additional political factors that help account for the opposition's relative lack of success?

Gathering and Analyzing the Public's Foreign Policy Arguments

In probing this question, I use a discursive institutionalist

4 Chan and Safran, "Public Opinion as a Constraint Against War".

approach to the problem of understanding opposition to an activist US policy. That is, I examine the ways members of the opposition formulate objections to the norms that support foreign policy activism and interventionism and in doing so put forward alternative norms. A discursive institutionalist approach generally emphasizes the deployment of ideas as a kind of political action in the form of persuasion and deliberation which draw upon culture and history by which to interpret a community's interests and values and construct a pathway to change.⁵ This approach allows us to uncover the clash of understandings and norms in the foreign affairs arena as a way of explaining the nature of and changes in the foreign policies of particular nations. In this paper, the emphasis is equally on grasping and explaining a lack of change given the growing strength of opposition to norms that have over the past 70 years supported an activist foreign policy.

The arguments examined here come from public comments on online fora connected with news or commentaries on the Libyan Intervention. This is a novel source for investigating the foreign policy arguments among the public. The broader social sciences literature has identified online fora as important sources of data on the general public's political views and arguments,⁶ but so far

⁵ See Vivian Schmidt, "Taking ideas and discourse seriously: explaining change through discursive institutionalism as the fourth 'new institutionalism,'" *European Political Science Review* (2010)

⁶ See, for example, Jennifer Keelan et al., "An analysis of the Human Papilloma Virus vaccine debate on MySpace blogs," *Vaccine*, Vol. 28, Issue 6 (February 2010); Liza Tsaliki, "Online Forums and the Enlargement of Public

little has been done to study those contributions when they touch on foreign policy issues in the US. This is an important omission because such arguments provide opportunities to examine directly the views of the activist portion of the non-elite population without the interposition of polling questions.

These arguments were gathered by entering search terms into Google (Libya, Libya and Arab Spring, Libyan Conflict, Libyan Intervention) then visiting threads on the resulting list and gathering all the substantive comments left on the relevant thread. These threads, chosen for their prominence, promise of large numbers of participants and collective mix of political positions, were hosted by *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, Fox News, The Daily Show, *The Orange County Register*, CNN, Huffington Post.com, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Chicago Tribune*, YahooNews, *USA Today*, *The Houston Chronicle*, (Iowa) *Press-Citizen*, *The Des Moines Register*, *The Tennessean*, *The Nation* and PennLive.com. The contributions gathered were

Space: Research Findings from a European Project,” *The Public*, Vol. 9, No. 2. (2002), and Peter Gries, “Tears of Rage: Chinese Nationalist Reactions to the Belgrade Embassy Bombing,” *The China Journal*, No. 46, July 2001; Eric Lawrence, *et al.*, “Self-Segregation or Deliberation? Blog Readership, Participation, and Polarization in American Politics,” *Perspectives in Politics*, Vol. 8, No.1 (March 2010); Jennifer Stromer-Galley, “Diversity of Political Conversation on the Internet: Users’ Perspectives,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (2003); Peter Dahlgren, “The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and Deliberation,” *Political Communication*, Vol. 22 (2005) and Tamara Witschge, “Examining Online Public Discourse in Context: A Mixed Methods Approach,” *The Public*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2008).

posted to these threads between March 5 and April 3, 2011. In all, 208 arguments were collected from 170 separate contributors, of whom 34 favored and 136 opposed intervention. I apply a textual analysis to the 171 arguments that opposed the intervention.

This approach was used in part because the opportunity to construct a larger and more thoroughly random sample from online fora employing one of the strategies found in the literature was limited due to the narrowness of the topic and the debate's short timeline.⁷ For this reason, as well the self-selected nature of the contributors and the small sample size, there is no claim here that the sample is statistically representative of the distribution of those arguments in the general population.⁸ Insofar as this project only makes preliminary claims, employs qualitative and textual methods to grasp the type of arguments used by opponents of the intervention and seeks to point the way forward for further research, the use of this type of convenience sample is appropriate.⁹ We are not attempting to derive a rigorous,

⁷ See Christopher Weare and Wan-Ying Lin, "Content Analysis of the World Wide Web: Opportunities and Challenges," *Social Science Computer Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Fall 2000).

⁸ Though by happenstance the particular sites from which arguments were gathered were collectively tilted to the liberal side of the political spectrum, the host sites themselves do not appear to have edited or winnowed these contributions other than for conformity with community standards, and self-identified conservatives made contributions on what are considered liberal sites.

⁹ See Scott Gartner, "The Multiple Effects of Casualties on Public Support for War: An Experimental Approach," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 102, Issue 1 (2008) for the use of a convenience sample for preliminary

comprehensive and detailed profile of public opinion, but rather to understand and explore the content of arguments Americans¹⁰ actually used in public spaces to oppose the intervention and to think about further research directions. The data generated by gathering a larger and more representative sample would probably provide us with additional types of arguments, but the absence of those additional data does not affect the findings or conclusions drawn here.

Ways of Categorizing and Understanding Foreign Policy Arguments

To understand the content of foreign policy arguments, we begin with Kant's understanding of the types of oppositional arguments to be expected in democracies. Kant predicts that these arguments will be of a decidedly pragmatic nature. The populace would object to

having to fight, having to pay the costs of war from their own resources, having painfully to repair the devastation war leaves behind, and, to fill up the measure of evils, load themselves with a heavy national debt that would embitter peace

purposes.

¹⁰ The assumption in the literature is that contributors to websites within a country are nationals unless they otherwise self-identify. See Tsaliki, "Online Forums and the Enlargement of Public Space".

itself and that can never be liquidated on account of constant wars in the future.

Such sentiments are relatively uncontroversial, depending as they do on the foundational desire to conserve the nation's human and material resources. Even when articulated by different groups, there is nothing to prevent those who oppose the conflict from cooperating towards that common end, and nothing that would permit government officials to automatically dismiss them as unimportant.

More recent literature gestures towards ascribing to opponents of activism an equally narrow and generally non-controversial range of positions. At least since the end of the 1970s, many scholars have focused on rebutting the Lippmann, Almond and Kennan contention that the general public's views on foreign policy are incoherent, volatile and amorphous.¹¹ This rejection has led to an ongoing project to understand those views systematically, mostly by identifying a small list of categories within which to place foreign policy views. While differences

¹¹ For example, Ole Holsti, "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Challenges to the Almond-Lippmann Consensus," Mershon Series: Research Programs and Debates, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Dec. 1992) and Miroslav Nincic, "A Sensible Public: New Perspectives on Popular Opinion and Foreign Policy," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (Dec. 1992). But also see Richard Clark and Kenneth Dautrich, "Who's Really Misreading the Public? A Comment on Kull and Ramsay's 'Challenging U.S. Policymakers' Image of an Isolationist Public'," *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 1, Issue 1 (2000).

exist regarding whether foreign policy views have vertical coherence or horizontal connections with domestic policy understandings,¹² many scholars maintain that not only does the public maintain coherent views taken separately, but also argue that there is a pattern to the public's views on both the individual and collective levels. Such patterns go beyond merely partisan understandings.¹³ There is some underlying system or logic that connects different positions, researchers claim, that allows us to account for different views and to characterize and predict the positions members of the public will take on a particular issue. The identification of that system or logic varies among scholars; attitudes towards the military, economics, the characteristics of foreign activities, etc. are all taken as reference points.¹⁴ Some of

¹² Ole Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996); Brian Rathbun, "Hierarchy and Community at Home and Abroad: Evidence of a Common Structure of Domestic and Foreign Policy Beliefs in American Elites," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (June 2007)

¹³ Though see Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, chap. 5, for some connections.

¹⁴ Eugene Wittkopf, "On the Foreign Policy Beliefs of the American People: A Critique and Some Evidence," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Dec.1986); Jon Hurwitz and Mark Peffley, "How Are Foreign Policy Attitudes Structured? A Hierarchical Model," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 81, No. 4 (Dec.1987); Ole Holsti and James Rosenau, "The Structure of Foreign Policy Attitudes among American Leaders," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 52, No. 1 (Feb.1990); Eugene Wittkopf, *Faces of Internationalism: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990; Daniel Drezner, "The Realist Tradition in American Public Opinion," *Perspectives on Politics*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (March 2008); Bruce Jentleson, "The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (March 1992); William Chittick, Keith Billingsley and Rick Travis, "A Three-Dimensional

these studies attempt to reduce foreign policy understandings to four basic positions; others construct three-dimensional spaces in which to locate various views. But the predominant theme is the attempt to link various positions within a coherent framework, thus providing a structured and often simple understanding of the public's foreign policy views that tend to lump opponents of activism into a few generic categories.

The dominant classification scheme comes from the influential studies by Wittkopf on non-elites and Holsti and Rosenau's confirmatory study of elite views.¹⁵ It has been cited extensively in the literature and considered a standard model. Most important in this scheme are a) citizens' orientations regarding openness to activism in foreign policy matters and b) their attitudes towards types of intervention, whether military or non-military. Thus, the scheme assumes important gross differentiations between those who favor an activist foreign policy and those who do not, as well as various orientations towards military and humanitarian interventions and cooperation. In a broad sense, this is a policy-oriented typology. While it can take specific arguments and their cultural, ideological or historical background into account, it primarily takes as its data the approval or disapproval of a particular foreign policy project based on its external

Model of American Foreign Policy Beliefs," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Sept.1995).

¹⁵ Wittkopf, "On the Foreign Policy Beliefs of the American People: A Critique and Some Evidence," and Holsti and Rosenau, "The Structure of Foreign Policy Attitudes among American Leaders".

characteristics.

This scheme produces a 2 x 2 typology, yielding four basic orientations. Of these, two are important for our purposes in representing positions that oppose an activist policy orientation that would generate military interventions. These are first *Isolationists*, who in this understanding are those who wish to safeguard American values by withdrawing from the contaminating influence of the world, rejecting most or even all interventions of whatever type. The less activist the foreign policy the better in this view, due to the desire not to mingle with nations or forces outside the US. More sympathetic towards interacting with the world, but nonetheless usually opposed to military interventions, are critics dubbed *Accommodationists*. These see an active role for the US primarily in the form of humanitarian and other nonmilitary means taken in conjunction with allies and international institutions. Accommodationists would generally reject military intervention as a whole while being supportive of multi-lateral, non-military actions which support democratization and humanitarian aid. In this understanding then, opposition comes either from those who wish to completely abandon the world or from those who only wish to work with international institutions on humanitarian and democratization projects.

Such could be the positions Americans adopted to oppose the Libyan Intervention. However, the literature also contains studies that indicate that a broader range of arguments and orientations

towards foreign affairs characterize American politics.¹⁶ For example, Walter Mead's discussion of foreign policy traditions argues for four independent and important schools of foreign policy, three of which might be relevant here.¹⁷ *Hamiltonians* in Mead's parlance place importance on defending America's economic interests and using power to promote trade and commerce, but tend to oppose policies that may harm those interests. *Jeffersonians* are skeptical of foreign involvement in general because they deeply fear that republican institutions will be harmed by a turn towards imperial ambitions. *Jacksonians*, who resemble the realists Drezner describes, are also reluctant to engage in foreign interventions unless US national security is directly involved, but then support the full and unilateral unleashing of American military power if security interests are at risk.

Dumbrell's study of isolationism is also relevant.¹⁸ His identifies a four-part typology of isolationist arguments structured

¹⁶ For a study that holds that the politics of foreign policy in general is now complex, see Charles Kupchan and Peter Trubowitz, "Dead Center: The Demise of Liberal Internationalism in the United States," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Fall 2007) as well as the exchange between Kupchan and Trubowitz, "Illusion of Liberal Internationalism's Revival" and Stephen Choudin, Helen Milner and Dustin Tingley, "The Center Still Holds: Liberal Internationalism Survives," both in *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 1 (Summer 2010).

¹⁷ Walter R. Mead. *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003)

¹⁸ J. Dumbrell, "Varieties of Post-Cold War American Isolationism," *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 34 (1999).

by a realist/idealist binary. Here Dumbrell identifies the following: *Unilateralists*, who oppose many foreign policy ventures by emphasizing national interests, the safeguarding of American sovereignty and a distrust of international organizations and allies; *New Populist America Firsters*, who focus on the need to address American problems rather than engaging in foreign policy ventures, particularly those involving foreign aid and other uses of American resources; *Anti-Globalizationists*, who resist free trade agreements and decry the effects of corporatist globalization on the United States as a way of defending American exceptionalism, and *Anti-Imperialists*, who oppose the role of the US as a hegemonic enforcer of post-Cold War peace and order.

Johnstone's deconstruction of the concept of isolationism provides yet another approach to mapping arguments.¹⁹ Rejecting the label of isolationist as empty and pejorative, he instead identifies two components of a general position opposing foreign policy interventionism. *Non-interventionism* is resistance to "political entanglements and military engagements". Johnstone does not view this component as completely opposed to involvement in the outside world, but rather a position that emphasizes the need to minimize military involvement due to "the threat and potentially negative impact of war on the United States". *Unilateralism*, in contrast, is resistance to becoming tied

¹⁹ Andrew Johnstone, "Isolationism and Internationalism in American Foreign Relations,"

Journal of Transatlantic Studies, Vol. 9, Issue 1 (2011).

to alliances and bound by international laws and treaties that might drag the US into ventures against the will of its ordinary citizens. Its focus is on freedom of action, a goal, Johnstone argues, that is connected with positive conceptions of American exceptionalism. America's unique character must be safeguarded through the assertion of national sovereignty.

A fifth typology of arguments that also describes a more complicated set of arguments opposing intervention is derived from the work of Davis and Lynn-Jones.²⁰ This study hypothesizes that American foreign policy oscillates between activist and isolationist stances associated with different understandings of the meaning and implications of American exceptionalism. In the original model, Davis and Lynn-Jones identify one rendering of exceptionalism as taking the US as a "city upon a hill" with a mission of spreading American values throughout the world. Here, America's perceived difference from the rest of the world informs a messianic mindset that promotes intervention. This understanding of *Offensive Exceptionalism*, so to speak, resembles the description of an activist position described by Pateman and McCartney.²¹ In the contrary rendering,

²⁰ Tami R. Davis and Sean M. Lynn-Jones, "Citty upon a Hill," *Foreign Policy*, No. 66 (Spring, 1987).

²¹ Robert Pateman, "Globalisation, the New US Exceptionalism and the War on Terror," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 6 (2006); Paul McCartney, "American Nationalism and U.S. Foreign Policy from September 11 to the Iraq War," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 119, No. 3 (Fall 2004).

understandings of what we might call *Defensive Exceptionalism* make Americans wary of contamination by the rest of the world. In this understanding, the difference between the US and the world creates anxieties lest that difference be lost through contact with inferior ways of life. This type of argument would be used to resist most foreign interventions. Davis and Lynn Jones also note a third form of difference discourse, in the guise of Vietnam-era arguments that paint the US as uniquely aggressive in its interactions with the world (*Malignant Exceptionalism*). This position would oppose foreign interventions on the grounds of the harm they inflict on others, being as they are the product of imperialism and hegemony.

In critiquing and augmenting this model elsewhere, I have shown that various foreign policy positions can be justified by positing a non-exceptionalist view.²² Some people will justify foreign endeavors on the assumption that problems in the world are susceptible to the same policies and practices that have been successful at home because the US and the world are ultimately similar, thus positing an *Offensive Universalist* understanding supportive of intervention. This position characterizes important neo-conservative justifications of the G.W. Bush administration's foreign policy stance²³ and would support interventions on the

²² "The Portrayal of Similarities in the Justification of Empire: G.A. Henty and Late 19th Century Imperial Literature," *The McNeese Review*, Vol.37, No.1.

²³ See Michael Desch, "America's Liberal Illiberalism: The Ideological Origins of Overreaction in U.S. Foreign Policy," *International Security*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Winter 2008).

grounds that the US has an obligation to help others exercise and realize common values, such as those associated with democracy. Of importance here are the analogous anti-activist arguments that also draw upon the understanding that the world is similar to the home country. In these *Laissez-faire Universalist* arguments, the fact that the world is similar to the US means there is no need for an activist foreign policy to help spread values and institutions. Human nature being universal, other countries do not require US assistance to discover and construct norms and institutions whose moral worth and functional benefits are readily apparent to all.

Stepping back, we see from even this limited survey that scholars have identified a wide variety of arguments opposing interventionist policies. After consolidating overlapping categories, we can combine the results of these analyses into a list of nine different types of relevant arguments that opponents of the Libyan intervention could use: *Jacksonian*, *Unilateralist*, *Non-interventionist*, *Jeffersonian*, *Defensive Exceptionalist/Anti-Globalization*, *Hamiltonian*, *Laissez-faire Universalist*, *Malignant Exceptionalist/Anti-Imperialist*, and *Pragmatic/America First*. If the arguments we find in this sample reproduce this variety, we may have found a possible explanation for their ineffectiveness. Depending on the nature of the variety, differences among opponents may lead to problems in cooperating politically.

Another particular characteristic may also be politically

relevant. America First, Jeffersonian, Accommodationist and Jacksonian arguments are non-controversial in the sense that they command many adherents and are viewed as mainstream positions. Others are importantly controversial, departing as they do from the taken for granted rules for depicting the US and thinking about its place in the world. To maintain that activism harms US interests often leads to charges that critics of intervention blame the US for the world's problems and for such events as the 9/11 attacks. Descriptions of the US as imperialist and hegemonic generate even stronger negative reactions, being viewed as deeply unpatriotic, disloyal and insulting to members of the armed forces. The presence of the latter may play a role in the opposition's lack of success by linking all opposition to such unpopular arguments, thereby serving to delegitimize the opposition and allowing government officials to ignore the opposition as politically toothless.

A Sample of Arguments Opposing the US Intervention in Libya²⁴

What are the arguments are contained in this sample? Are they pragmatic in the ways Kant predicted? Are they diverse? Are they

²⁴ The following lists the oppositional arguments deployed in terms of raw numbers: America First (30), Universal *Realpolitik* (10), Interventions Harm US Institutions (10), The World is a Jungle (28), Oil and Corporate Interests (32), Irony (44), US a Hegemon (10) and Intervene Only to Defend US Security (7).

controversial? The following is a summary of the eight different categories of arguments and the ten actual argument types that were found.

(1) America First

This argument holds that the US should attend to its own problems rather than intervene in Libya. To intervene means to divert essential time, energy and expertise away from addressing domestic troubles. Most of these arguments deployed a straightforward contention that intervention would result in the expenditure of institutional resources better utilized to solve domestic problems and that attempting to address both Libya and domestic issues will result in all-around failure. American institutions do not have the capacity to address both.

(2) Universal Realpolitik

In this argument, Libya is described as being in the midst of a military campaign to defeat forces seeking to overthrow its government. The Libyan government inevitably uses its military in ways that lead to bloodshed and does not have the luxury of protecting individual rights. While regrettable, there is nothing wrong with such actions because they are necessary for survival. All countries, including the US, operate according to the amoral rules of *realpolitik* that the Libyan government is following.²⁵ This argument questions US exceptionalism and moral superiority

²⁵ <http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/02/reader-comments-on-my-libya-column/> (accessed April 8, 2011).

by locating the US as part of a world dominated by Hobbesian humans. The world is unruly and requires that governments forcibly impose order. The US should not condemn actions that are part of this messy though normal course of politics, much less intervene in such situations.

(3) Interventions Harm US Institutions

These arguments hold that military interventions erode Constitutional standards and generally harm American political institutions.²⁶ The general argument is that, in their eagerness to involve the US in foreign affairs, presidents and members of Congress violate the Constitution and corrupt the government.²⁷ The urge to acquire power internationally leads inevitably to the project of centralizing power domestically for functional (empire building requires a decision-making process uncomplicated by checks and balances) or psychological reasons (the corrupting potential of power works its way from arenas of international policymaking to the domestic front, with decision-makers increasingly acting like emperors).

(4) The World is a Jungle

Arguments here emphasize the problematic nature of the world while supplying several complementary propositions. The first is

²⁶ dianatx,

<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2011/04/05/qaddafi-ready-discuss-govt-change-s-rebels-advance/#comment> (accessed April 6, 2011)

²⁷ <http://letters.ocregister.com/category/international/> (accessed March 23, 2011).

that problems are all around us and will always be with us. There are lots of bad people in the world and there is no way the US can resolve all the problems they create. Second, arguments often point to problematic areas in which the US did not or has not intervened and assert that intervening in Libya will create a policy precedent by which the US will be endlessly dragged into similar situations.²⁸ This slippery slope logic fits with other contentions that problems are unsolvable given the nature of the people in question.²⁹ The obstacle to action here is the general nastiness of the world outside the US. This position reveals a pragmatism whose critical focus is external rather than internal. Even if the US is different and even if its institutions were strong, it still could not save the world because the world is far from being salvageable.

(5) Oil and Corporate Interests

These arguments hold that the main reason for the US intervention in Libya is the presence of oil reserves and/or the influence of corporate interests. This judgment renders the endeavor illegitimate. These arguments take two forms. Argument 5(a) holds that the US government is the actor, pursuing a realist but immoral policy to secure energy supplies.³⁰ Argument 5(b),

²⁸ <http://community.nytimes.com/comments/www.nytimes.com/2011/03/29/world/africa/29prexy.html> (accessed March 29, 2011).

²⁹ Jeff Gabel,

<http://www.foxnews.com/world/2011/04/05/qaddafi-ready-discuss-govt-change-s-rebels-advance/#comment> (accessed April 6, 2011).

³⁰ “alance,” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/does-the-us-really-want-to->

in contrast, holds that the government is no more than a puppet of Big Oil and other corporate entities.³¹

For all those who deploy these arguments, the correct answer to the question of intervention is self-evident. If oil is involved, either as a strategic interest or as a commodity, intervention is morally unjustifiable. These arguments again differ from previous rejections of military intervention. It is not the case that the world is to blame due to its recalcitrant nature or corrosive influence. American values, institutions, officials and corporations are already corrupt and the purpose of opposing interventions is to prevent that corruption from further harming the world.

(6) Irony

Irony arguments hold that US intervention will produce results directly opposed to US intentions. The first variant (6a) holds that in assisting the Libyan rebels, the US will not be furthering democracy and freedom, but arming and placing into power Islamic terrorists who are hostile to US interests. This *Blowback* argument is often tied to narratives in which US aid to the Afghan resistance in the 1980s is said to have resulted in the triumph of

own-libya/2011/03/30/AFV4QA5B_allComments.html#comments (accessed March 31, 2011).

³¹ mlkwek,”

http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/does-the-us-really-want-to-own-libya/2011/03/30/AFV4QA5B_allComments.html#comments (accessed March 31, 2011).

the Taliban and the rise of Al Qaeda.³² The second variant (6b) holds that military intervention in Libya is ironic because such an intervention, if it is meant to save lives, will only result in the loss of more lives by prolonging the conflict.³³

Irony plays out differently in these two variants. The first betrays a suspicion of helping insurgents. The character of particular elements of the outside world does not make intervention merely ineffective, but harmful to US security. The second variant is more critical of the impact of military operations than of insurgents, holding that military intervention itself is a blunt instrument, the immediate and long-term effects of which are often unrecognized by the US and harmful to those on whose behalf the intervention is mounted.

(7) *The US is a Hegemon*

Hegemon arguments hold that the Libyan intervention is part of an illegitimate series of operations in which the US pursues, consolidates and exercises its power as the world's dominant nation to create a particular kind of world order.³⁴ Where this

³² "tommy thek50",
<http://discussions.latimes.com/20/lanews/la-naw-obama-analysis-20110329/10>
(accessed March 29, 2011)

³³ "TXCOL47," March 31, 2011
<http://www.chron.com/disp/discuss.mpl/nation/7498627.html> (accessed April 6, 2011)

³⁴ "D," April 3, 2011,
<http://kristof.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/04/02/reader-comments-on-my-libya-column/> (accessed April 8, 2011)

argument differs from the Oil and Corporate arguments is its attribution to the government of a comprehensive plan for world hegemony. It is not just oil, but geostrategic superiority that the US government seeks. Interventions are part of a larger, coherent, imperialist and therefore illegitimate US strategy.

(8) Intervene Only to Defend US Security

These arguments place US security as the sole criterion justifying intervention.³⁵ If an intervention is not directly connected with security, then it is not warranted and opposition is justifiable. This argument is driven by a realist and Jacksonian understanding of the need to conserve resources by only deploying them to defend strategic, important interests. The objection to intervention is contextual because it depends on interpretations of whether or not national security is at stake. Some who used the same reasoning did conclude that national security was involved in Libya and supported the intervention.

Discussion

Types and Varieties of Arguments

The first issue to address is the character of these arguments, particularly their variety. The table below maps these arguments

³⁵ “Zell,”

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/03/29/scarborough-libya-hypocrisy_n_842034.html (accessed March 30, 2011)

onto our preliminary list:

Argument Typology

<i>Argument Type</i>	Jacksonian	Jeffersonian	Defensive Exceptionalist/ Anti-Globalizationist	New Populist America First	Non-Interventionist
Argument	8	3		1	6(a)
<i>Argument Type</i>	Unilateralist	Hamiltonian	Laissez-faire Universalist	Malignant Exceptionalist/Anti-Imperialist	Other Arguments
Argument			2	5(a), (b), 7	4, 6(b)

We see that of the arguments that can be mapped on our preliminary list, the variety is considerable. Included are arguments that can be classified in six of the nine types of arguments identified above, plus several that were not previously identified. As such, they are not confined to the types of arguments we would identify with Kant's theoretical account of opposition to war.

Several of the arguments are worthy of further consideration before we begin a systematic analysis. Addressing first the arguments that cannot be located on our list, *The World is a Jungle* deploys an anti-exceptionalist and Hobbesian view of the world. But unlike other anti-exceptionalist arguments, it does not argue that either actions or interactions are harmful to the US or to the world. Rather, the thrust is pragmatic, arguing that action is futile and endless in terms of its putative goal. By marking the failure of governments to create order and portraying as hopeless the task of transforming the world in the American image, it rebuts Offensive Exceptionalism and contains close affinities with the critique that Fukuyama has supplied of the contemporary neo-conservative

agenda.³⁶ The *Irony of Military Intervention* argument, meanwhile, disputes the proposition that military ventures constitute a proper foreign policy tool. Implicit is a condemnation of the government for employing military means. There is some kinship here with anti-imperialist arguments that paint the US as the source of problems, with the latter differing from this argument in their deeper and broader critique.

With regard to variations within categories of arguments, we see important variety in the *Malignant Exceptionalist/Anti-Imperialist* arguments. The *Corporate Interests* argument is anti-Hamiltonian. It condemns the attempt to defend and further trade and economic interests through military action and sees the impetus for such projects as residing in the control commercial entities exercise over political institutions. The *Hegemon* arguments, in contrast, impute to American *institutions* the policy of imposing America's political and economic will on the rest of the world. They are neither as narrow as the Corporate Interest variation, nor do they contain any hint that the government is weak or a puppet of other forces. They instead identify the state as a powerful actor that poses a threat to other countries. Finally, the *Universal Realpolitik* argument is a variation of the Laissez-faire Universalist argument. However, unlike the initial definition of the latter presented here, the anti-exceptionalism of Universal *Realpolitik* does not involve the judgment that the US and the world are the same in accepting

³⁶ See Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power and the Neo-Conservative Legacy*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006.

desirable values, but that all governments necessarily operate in accordance with the same amoral rules. It holds that political life in general is not about spreading or recognizing similar values in other nations but about order, and the necessary and messy means by which all governments create and keep order. The US should refrain from interfering in that process no matter how disgusted its citizens feel when witnessing it.

It is also important to note the difference between the *Intervene Only to Protect the US Security* and *Blowback* arguments. Both contain realist elements that privilege national security; indeed, both may be seen in the context of the international relations literature as defensive realist arguments, with the first emphasizing a narrow understanding of security and the second invoking the problem of security dilemmas. However, as non-interventionist arguments that emphasize unintended consequences and irony, *Blowback* arguments differ from *Intervene Only to Protect US Security* arguments because they do not condemn the venture on the grounds that it is unrelated to national security, but because it is *negatively* related: actions either mistakenly benefit unfriendly forces or turn populations against the US, making the US less rather than more safe. Thus, this argument combines a focus on action, the outside world and a politically conservative emphasis on unintended consequences. Importantly, *Blowback* in combination with other Irony arguments constitutes a plurality of arguments here. The Jacksonian *Intervene Only to Protect US Security* argument, meanwhile, is much less numerous,

concentrates on the US and assumes a straightforward analysis of the impact of action or inaction on national security.

Perhaps the most important argument here is that of *America First*. References to this argument are quite numerous in this sample. They come closest to Kant's prediction of opposition arguments, being pragmatic objections that reference the costs of war. As such, while they initially appear to be a kind of Defensive Exceptionalist argument because of their focus on the problems that are visited on the US due to interventionist policies, they are not defensive in that they do not see the outside world as an active source of threat, but rather as a troublesome source of competition for attention and resources. They resemble Jeffersonian arguments in emphasizing the harm that results from action rather than that which comes from interaction. However, where the Jeffersonian position has it that action results in the perversion of institutions, America First arguments hold that action results in the overloading of institutions, thus positing a zero-sum game among different issue areas that is framed by an assumption of limited capabilities and resources. But it is here that they also appear to depart from the Kantian prediction. This is not just an objection to the use of resources, but more generally a lament about the cost to institutions. The main point is potentially more sophisticated than the Kantian version, in that it is not just dollars or lives that are seen as the price of war, but also the fact that foreign ventures stretch American institutions beyond their capacities, thus highlighting a functional as well as a moral and material mismatch between those

institutions and interventionist policies.

Analysis

This sample contains a rich assortment of arguments. What does a further analysis tell us about possible political reasons why opponents of this intervention were ineffective?

A starting point is to underline the point regarding the variety of arguments found. This variety is multi-dimensional. We start first with the types of reasoning used to oppose the intervention. As we saw above, several pragmatic arguments are present. These come in the form of America First, the World is a Jungle, Irony, Blowback and Security arguments. None fit completely with the Kantian prediction. As noted above, America First comes closest with its complaint about the use of resources outside US borders. The Intervene only to Protect American Security may also be a Kantian-type practical argument in that it involves the attempt to preserve resources. The remainder, however, are more distant, having more to do either with the futility or the unintended consequences of action. Non-pragmatic arguments, meanwhile, fall into two quite dissimilar groups. One set references the negative effects on American character, culture and institutions. Such reasoning is employed by Jeffersonian *Intervention Harms American Institutions* arguments as well as, to a degree, *America First* arguments. The other set opposes activist policies on the grounds that interventions are immoral attempts to control other peoples' lands and resources, or to misuse the military. *Hegemony*,

Oil and Corporate Interests, as well as the *Irony of Military Use* arguments fall into this category.

Underlining these different types of reasoning is the employment of different central concepts, in the form of Harm, Exceptionalism, US Institutions, Hobbesian Violence, the Nature of the World, World Order, Irony, the Military, Corporations, National Security and *Realpolitik*. We see that five of these elements take very different forms across these arguments:

- a) Understandings of Harm: arguments variously identify harms that flow from actions *versus* those that flow from interactions, as well as those that the world inflicts on the US *versus* those that the US inflicts on the world;
- b) Understandings of Exceptionalism: Exceptionalism is sometimes invoked as a quality that must be guarded by refusing engagement with the world. It is also understood as a quality that signals the incapacity of the US to reshape the rest of the world in its image. Sometimes it is also seen a characteristic that makes the US unfit to engage with the world, while at other times it is taken as a mistaken understanding of America's relationship with the world;
- c) Understandings of US institutions: Institutions are sometimes described as a set of good but endangered entities versus entities with limited capacities, versus entities that are the puppets of large economic interests, versus powerful, autonomous and sinister organizations;
- d) Understandings of Hobbesian violence: Hobbesian violence

is sometimes identified as a characteristic that marks the world as unredeemable. At other times, it is invoked as an environmental characteristic that every effective government must ruthlessly confront; at still other times, it is viewed as an undesirable characteristic of particular policies;

e) Understandings of World Order: World order is sometimes conceptualized as the product of illegitimate actions by the US; at others, it is seen as an impossible goal.

This variety signals an analogous diversity of larger political agendas and different foreign policy norms, some of which (as Rathbun notes) are connected with domestic politics. In tracing these agendas and norms, we are able to locate important obstacles to cooperation in the form of incompatible goals. Thus, those who argue that *Military Intervention Harms Institutions* are happy with US institutions and wish to protect them, while *America Firsters* are worried by institutional overstretch and wish to protect US citizens from the consequences of institutional failure. Both, however, would advocate a norm that sees the protection of American institutions and resources as the main priority of government action. Anti-Imperialists who draw upon radical arguments to hold that the *US is a Hegemon*, that the government or corporations are pursuing *Oil*, or that the government is controlled by *Corporate Interests* are attempting to protect other nations from the US, are unhappy with American institutions and are communicating their normative desire to engage in fundamental reform of the state and large economic

players. They would advocate a norm that privileges the interests of every global player equally and hold that attempts to protect and further American interests should be narrowly circumscribed by moral criteria. That position may also be connected politically with those who draw upon the doctrine of unintended consequences to identify the *Irony of Military Intervention*. These arguments have on their agenda the goal of protecting possible victims of American action, implying the need to reign in and possibly reduce the size of the American military. However, those who reference irony as *Blowback* and seek to change militaristic policies in order to protect the US by not foolishly aiding its enemies, and those who draw upon Hobbesian and realist understandings to depict the *World is a Jungle*, point to *Universal Realpolitik* and believe in the maxim that the government should *Intervene Only to Protect the US* have no problems with the character of American institutions, but in highlighting what they believe is the true nature of the world strive pragmatically to prevent those institutions from engaging in Quixotic adventures. They advocate a norm that privileges US security as the highest priority, but seek to inform that norm with what they regard as a more clear-headed and sophisticated understanding of policies than is displayed by Neo-conservatives.

A final point is to trace these arguments to different traditions within American political culture, thereby highlighting the fundamental political tensions among some of them. *America First* draws upon populist and communitarian sources of thought.

Universal Realpolitik is Hobbesian and realist, and participates in conservative law and order narratives, including (perhaps ironically) those informed by conservative Christianity. *The World is a Jungle* is also Hobbesian and realist, and probably has roots in conservative Christian understandings and related Nativist narratives. *Intervention Harms US Institutions* is civic republican and democratic. *Oil and Corporate Interests* arguments are populist and radical. *Irony of Military Intervention* arguments in this sample are liberal internationalist, while the *Blowback* arguments are populist and often informed by either conservative or radical understandings of unintended consequences. *Hegemon* arguments are also radical. Finally, *Intervene only to Protect the US* arguments, as Jacksonian arguments, are ultimately communitarian informed by realism. There is no overall structure that connects these traditions. They exist, as do the traditions that Mead and the multiple traditions literature reference,³⁷ independently of one another in terms of their philosophical groundings and are often at odds with one another in terms of their political goals and methods.

³⁷ In particular, see Rogers Smith, "Beyond Tocqueville, Myrdal, and Hartz: The Multiple Traditions in America," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 87 Issue 3 (1993) Rodney Hero, "Multiple Theoretical Traditions in American Politics and Racial Policy Inequality," *Political Research Quarterly* vol. 56, no. 4 (December 2003) and Deborah Schildkraut, "Defining American Identity in the Twenty-First Century: How Much 'There' is There?" *Journal of Politics* Volume 69, Issue 3 (August 2007).

Conclusion

The variety and content displayed by this sample of arguments may be important for thinking about the failure of the domestic opposition to stop military interventions. We have seen above that opponents of this intervention can view the world and the US in quite different terms and have different agendas and norms in mind. In particular, there are opponents who are intent on protecting the *status quo* both in the US and in the world (preserving the US as a powerful capitalist nation or as the lone superpower) who stand opposed to those who are intent on changing that *status quo* on both levels. Such differences make for odd bedfellows in opposition, and it would be no surprise that such cohabitation would not occur. One important manifestation of this phenomenon is the demonstrated reluctance of Noam Chomski to cooperate with Ron Paul despite Chomski's acknowledgement of important similarities with Paul on foreign policy matters. While Paul has been amenable to cooperating with people outside the conservative and libertarian camps (including Rep. Dennis Kucinich), Chomski and his followers are reluctant to be associated with Paul due to important differences in domestic politics and economic policies.³⁸

³⁸ For example, <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article30251.htm> and http://www.huffingtonpost.com/democracy-now/noam-chomsky-on-ron-pauls_b_961804.html. Going back further, Jones argues that the isolationists of the 1930s gradually lost their ability to control US ventures in the international arena because they split over differences in preferred tactics. See Manfred Jones, *Isolationism in America 1935-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966).

Building upon these observations is another line of analysis. This has to do with the acceptability of arguments in terms of whether they fit with the mainstream of 20th century public opinion. We can divide these arguments into three rough groups—those that are broadly given credence by officials and the median voter, those that are marginally given credence, and those that are unacceptable to officials and the median voter. The first group probably includes America First, Intervene Only to Protect American Security, and possibly the World is a Jungle. Holding that the well-being of the US should be the main focus of policy, arguing that US security should be interpreted narrowly in terms of foreign interventions, and understanding the world outside the US as unruly are hardly controversial. Marginally acceptable are Interventions Harm American Institutions and possibly Universal Realpolitik. There are hints at controversy in these arguments. The first type of argument gestures towards an accusation that paints US institutions as corrupt, a gesture some parts of the populace may reject as unpatriotic. Universal Realpolitik may strike many as excessively cynical and insufficiently informed by a moral vision. Not generally acceptable are Hegemony, Oil and Corporate Interests, and Irony/Blowback arguments. These arguments accuse the US of corruption, of generally being a force of evil in the world and to blame for such events as 9/11.

If opposition is based importantly on controversial arguments of the second or third categories above, or even if such controversial arguments are merely present, general opposition to

an intervention can be delegitimized. This appears to have partly been the case with the debate over the Second Gulf War. Arguments based on blowback, imperialism, hegemony and corporate interests were deemed outside the bounds of acceptable debate and dismissed, along with other arguments against the intervention. Those who employ such arguments were saddled with the “blame America first” label, people whose ideas and views are unworthy of attention and whom officials need not take seriously.³⁹ The same could well have been true of the Libyan Intervention.

We obviously require more data on the popularity of these arguments among the members of both the active and general populations of non-elites, as well as the nature of other arguments that members of the public express. But we already have some indications that these arguments are fairly widespread. The most important indicator is that many of them are already identified in the literature. Polling data also exist that touch on some arguments. For example, in two polls questioning respondents regarding their confidence that military intervention would lead to a stable, democratic government in Libya (a question related to the pragmatic skepticism of the World is a Jungle argument), 54% and 59% respectively of those polled were not too, or not at all,

³⁹ See Rich Lowry, “A ‘Blame America First’ Republican,” *New York Post*, December 20, 2011, <http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?id=616> (Donald Rumsfeld), <http://www.npr.org/2013/03/20/174812898/looking-back-on-the-start-of-the-iraq-war> (Richard Perle)

confident that such an outcome would result.⁴⁰

It is also the case that high profile opponents of military and other interventions in general use several of the arguments rehearsed by these internet commenters. For example, Chalmers Johnson, the late author of the best-seller *Blowback* and other books on foreign policy, extensively uses a variety of these arguments, including irony arguments, the parent of the corporate argument, and the Jeffersonian Intervention Harms American Institutions arguments. The concept of blowback that Johnson extensively used invokes irony in the form of unintended consequences. Likewise, Johnson in his later work relied upon a causal theory of intervention that featured the influence of the military-industrial complex on political decision-making. The evil effects of interventions and empire on American institutions also form an important part of Johnson's critical analysis.⁴¹ Ron Paul, the libertarian Republican political figure, uses irony arguments in by identifying and emphasizing the unintended and negative consequences of interventions. He uses variants of the World is a Jungle argument and utilizes Jeffersonian references to the harm done by an activist foreign policy on American institutions,

⁴⁰ CNN/ORC Poll, Aug. 24-25, 2011. AP-GfK Poll conducted by GfK Roper Public Affairs & Corporate Communications, March 24-28, 2011.

⁴¹ Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire*, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2004), *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy and the End of the Republic* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2004), *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Empire* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), and *Dismantling the Empire: America's Last Best Hope* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2010).

particularly the disempowerment of Congress. He is also generally pessimistic regarding the capacity of the US to change the behavior of other nations and leaders, and thus employs variants of the World is a Jungle argument.⁴² Noam Chomsky, meanwhile, tirelessly makes references to American hegemony in his critique and deploys an analysis that importantly features and condemns the influence of oil companies and other corporate entities on foreign policy decisionmaking.⁴³

To sum up, we find that in examining these preliminary data, the Libyan Intervention appears to have been opposed by a wide variety of arguments focusing on different types of objections, some of which are controversial. This variety in itself could be an important explanatory factor in accounting for the unsuccessful attempts of ordinary opponents of interventions to influence foreign policy through the strategy of voice even given the institutional and electoral factors Chan and Safran identify.

⁴² For Ron Paul's arguments, see *Mises and Austrian Economics: A Personal View*, Auburn, Ala: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1984; "Trading Freedom for Security," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Winter/Spring 2003; *A Foreign Policy of Freedom*, Foundation for Rational Economics and Education, Inc. 2007; *Freedom Under Siege: The US Constitution After 200-Plus Years*, Auburn, Ala: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2007; *Pillars of Prosperity: Honest Money, Free Markets, Private Property*, Auburn, Ala: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2008; *Pursue the Cause of Liberty: A Farewell to Congress*, Auburn, Ala: Ludwig Von Mises Institute, 2012.

⁴³ These arguments can be found in, for example, *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* (New York: Holt 2004), *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy* (New York: Holt 2007) and *What We Say Goes: Conversations on Power in a Changing World* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007)

Variety may lead to problems of cooperation and coalition building. This is important when dealing with attempting to change a policy high government officials wish to pursue. Unity is important when trying to block action in such circumstances, particularly when defense and security matters are involved. The tentativeness lately exhibited in the formation of a liberal left/libertarian right opposition to drones despite common views is another contemporary manifestation of this problem.⁴⁴ The same is true of controversy. If officials can dismiss opposition by associating it with views that are deemed unpatriotic, unsupportive of the military, excessively critical of the US and sympathetic to America's enemies, they can evade accountability by refusing to be held accountable by those they believe the general public repudiates. If as Chan and Safran argue, the two-party, majoritarian nature of the American political system makes government officials less responsive to public opinion overall, then the division and resulting problems in mobilizing and organizing opposition could magnify the problems of responsiveness, making the influence of opposition in the US to particular military ventures doubl

⁴⁴ "A Senator's Stand on Drones Scrambles Party Lines," *New York Times*, March 7, 2013.