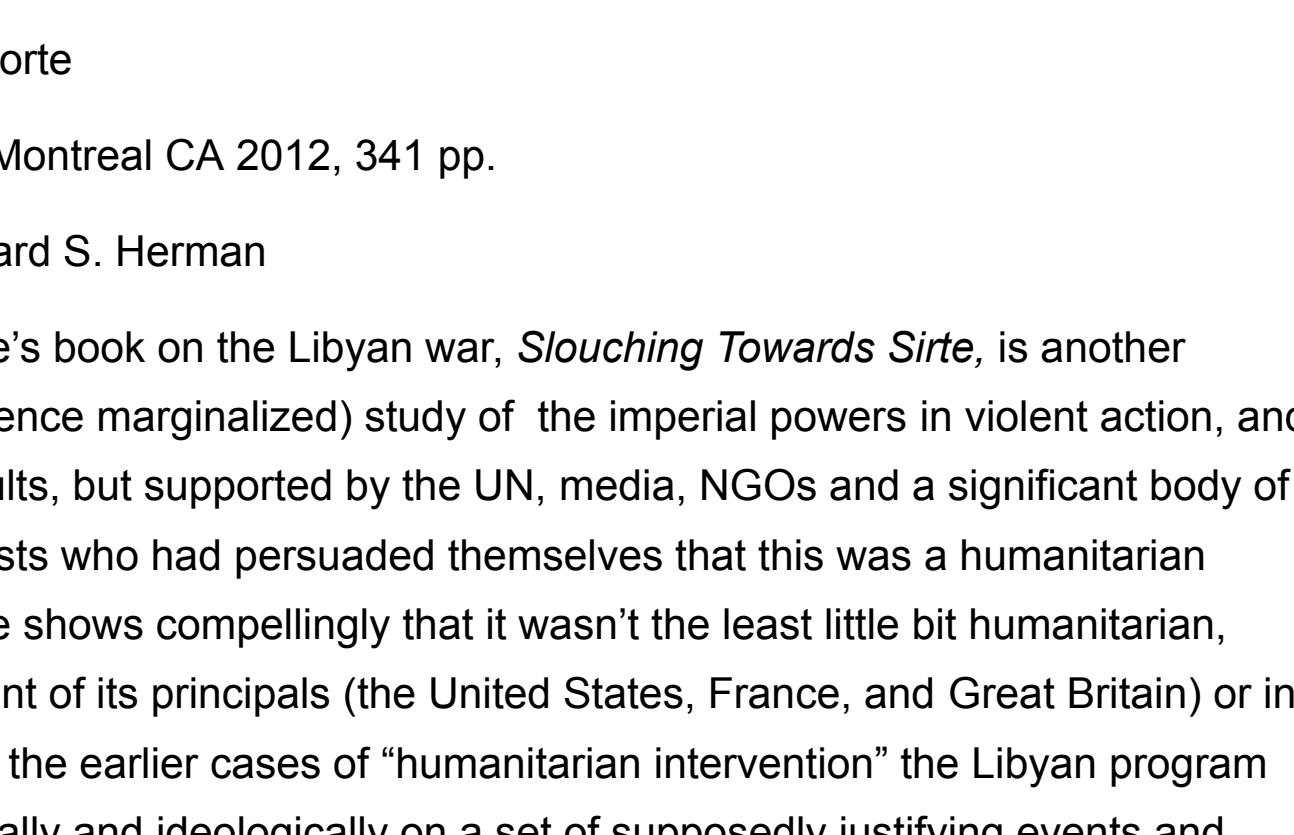


Slouching Towards Sirte: NATO's War on Libya and Africa

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By Maximilian Forte

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Review by Edward S. Herman



Maximilian Forte's book on the Libyan war, *Slouching Towards Sirte*, is another powerful (and hence marginalized) study of the imperial powers in violent action, and with painful results, but supported by the UN, media, NGOs and a significant body of liberals and leftists who had persuaded themselves that this was a humanitarian enterprise. Forte shows compellingly that it wasn't the least little bit humanitarian, either in the intent of its principals (the United States, France, and Great Britain) or in its results. As in the earlier cases of "humanitarian intervention" the Libyan program rested intellectually and ideologically on a set of supposedly justifying events and threats that were fabricated, selective, and/or otherwise misleading, but which were quickly institutionalized within the Western propaganda system. (For the deceptive model applied in the war on Yugoslavia, see Herman and Peterson, "The Dismantling of Yugoslavia," *Monthly Review*, October 2007; for the propaganda model applied to Rwanda, see Herman, "Rwanda and the New Scramble for Africa," *Z Magazine*, Jan. 2014)

The key elements in the war-on-Libya model were the alleged acute threat that Gaddafi was about to massacre large numbers of civilians (in early 2011), his supposed use of mercenaries imported from the south (black Africans) to do his dirty work, and his dictatorial rule. The first provided the core and urgent rationale for Security Council Resolution 1973 [R-1973], passed on March 17, 2011, which authorized members states "to take all necessary measures...to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, including Benghazi, while excluding a foreign occupation force in any form..." Its fraudulently benign and limited character was shown by this exclusion of an occupation force, as presumably any actions under this resolution would be limited to aircraft and missile operations "protecting civilians." Its deep bias is shown by its attributing the threat to civilians solely to Libyan government forces, not to the rebels as well, who turned out to greatly surpass the government forces as civilian killers, and with a racist twist.

As Forte spells out in detail, the imperial powers violated R-1973 from day 1 and clearly never intended to abide by its words. That resolution called for the "immediate establishment of a cease-fire and a complete end to violence," and "the need to intensify efforts to find a solution to the crisis" and to facilitate "a dialogue to lead to the political reforms necessary to find a peaceful and sustainable solution." Both Gaddafi and the African Union called for a cease fire and dialogue, but the rebels and imperial powers were not interested, and the bombing to "protect civilians" began within two days of the war-sanctioning resolution, without the slightest move toward obtaining a cease fire or starting negotiations.

Forte also shows that it was clear from the start that the imperial-power-warriors were using civilian protection as a "figleaf" cover for their real objective—regime change and the removal of Gaddafi (with substantial evidence that his death was part of the program and carried out with U.S. participation). The war that followed was one in which the imperial powers worked in close collaboration with the rebel forces, serving as their air arm, but also providing them with arms, training and propaganda support. The imperial powers, and Dubai, also had hundreds of operatives on the ground in Libya, training the rebels and giving them intelligence and other support, hence violating R-1973's prohibition of an occupation force "in any form."

Forte shows that the factual base for Gaddafi's alleged threat to civilians, his treatment of protesters in mid-February 2011, was more than dubious. The claimed striking at protesters by aerial attacks, and the Viagra-based rape surge, were straightforward disinformation, and the number killed was small—24 protesters in the three days, February 15-17, according to Human Rights Watch—fewer than the number of alleged "black mercenaries" executed by the rebels in Derna in mid-February (50), and fewer than the early protester deaths in Tunis or Egypt that elicited no Security Council effort to "protect civilians." There were claims of several thousand killed in February 2011, but Forte shows that this was also disinformation supplied by the rebels and their allies, but swallowed by many Western officials, media and other gullibles. That the actual evidence would induce the urgent and massive response by the NATO powers is implausible, and the rush to arms demands a different rationale than protecting civilians in a small North African state. Forte provides it, compellingly—Obama and company were seizing the "window of opportunity" for regime change.

Forte demonstrates throughout his book that from the beginning of the regime-change-war the bombing powers were not confining themselves to protecting civilians, but were very often targeting civilians. He shows that, as in Pakistan, they used "double-tapping," with lagged bombings that were sure civilian killers. They were also bombing military vehicles, troops and living quarters that were not attacking or threatening civilians. They also bombed ferociously anywhere their intelligence sources indicated that Gaddafi might be present. Forte also shows that the rebels were merciless in brutalizing and slaughtering people viewed as Gaddafi supporters, and in the substantial parts of the country where Gaddafi was supported, the rebels' air-force (i.e., NATO) was regularly called upon to bomb, and it did so, ruthlessly.

Forte's book title, *Slouching Towards Sirte*, and his front cover which shows devastated civilian apartment buildings in that city, focus attention on the essence of the NATO-rebel war. Sirte was Gaddafi's headquarters, and its populace and army remnants resisted the rebel advance for months, so it was eventually bombed into submission with a large number of civilians killed and injured. Forte notes that when NATO finally caught up with Gaddafi and bombed and decimated the small entourage that was with him on the outskirts of Sirte, this was justified by NATO because this group could still "threaten civilians!" This was a town that had to be destroyed to save it—for the rebels, who Forte shows (citing Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International and UN and other observers) executed substantial numbers of captured Gaddafi supporters. This was a major war crimes scene. The civilians in Sirte needed protection, from NATO and the rebels.

R-1973 explicitly mentioned Benghazi as a massacre-threatened town, but Forte points out that no document or witness was ever turned up during or after the war that indicated any Gaddafi plan to attack Benghazi, let alone engage in a civilian slaughter. Furthermore, Forte notes that "the only massacre to have occurred anywhere near [Benghazi] was the massacre of innocent black African migrant workers and black Libyans falsely accused of being 'mercenaries'...." The rebels and their air force smashed a stream of towns in Eastern Libya, killing and turning into refugees many thousands of civilians. The destruction of Sirte, similar to what R-1973 and the "international community" claimed to fear for Benghazi, and the lynching of Gaddafi, elicited no "grave concern" over "systematic violations of human rights," or call for any Chapter 7 response from the Western establishment. So in this Kafkaesque world the rebels and NATO behaved just as the "international community" claimed Gaddafi would behave, and the civilian casualties that resulted from the rebel-NATO combination vastly exceeded anything done by Gaddafi's forces, or any probable civilian deaths that would have resulted if NATO had stayed away.

This conclusion is strengthened by the fact that the rebels, from the beginning, pursued a race war. Forte stresses the importance in rebel actions of the hatred flowing from the rebels to Gaddafi forces and those deemed his supporters, which the rebels took to include anybody with a black skin. Many thousands of blacks were picked up by rebel forces, accused without the slightest proof of being mercenaries, and often executed. Among the many cases that Forte describes, in one a hospital was destroyed and dozens of black patients were massacred. The largely black population of the sizable town of Tawargha was entirely expelled by the rebels. This racism pre-dates the 2011-2012 war, and resulted in part from Gaddafi's policies reaching out to other African states, his relatively liberal treatment of black immigrants, and his inadequate counter-racist educational and economic-social policies that would alleviate distress at home. But Gaddafi was not a racist, whereas large numbers of the rebel forces (the "democratic opposition" in Western propaganda) were, and their successors, with NATO's help, allowed them to perform as a lynch mob in many places (as Forte documents).

The racist character of the war was reflected in the frequent focus on "black mercenaries" allegedly imported and used by Gaddafi. This was reiterated time and again by the rebels and their supporters and propagandists. Forte shows that this claim was not merely inflated, it was a lie. There were no black mercenaries brought in by Gaddafi. But the claim of the threat posed by his alleged resort to "mercenaries" (read: black mercenaries) was repeated by officials (e.g., Susan Rice and Hillary Clinton) and the mainstream media, and found its way even into R-1973 ("Deplored the continuing use of mercenaries by the Libyan authorities"). The charge was reiterated often by the rebels in justifying their systematic abuse of blacks during the war.

Note that for a Western target there are "mercenaries" whereas for big time killers there are "contractors." We may note also that while the word "genocide" was often used to describe Gaddafi's threat to the rebels and their supporters, in fact, the only facet of this conflict in which a special ethnic group was targeted for mistreatment and removal, and on a large scale, was the rebel focus on and treatment of black people. This point has, of course, escaped Western commentators on human rights.

There is another important race element involved in the Libyan war and regime change. Gaddafi was a devoted supporter of the idea of African independence, unity and escape from Western domination. He was a central figure in the organization of the African Union, served as its chairman, and called repeatedly for a United States of Africa, and for African lending and judicial authorities that could free Africa from subservience to the IMF, World Bank and international justice. He also invested substantial sums in African institutions, including schools, hospitals, mosques and hotels. Forte shows that this Africanist thrust troubled U.S. and other Western authorities, often frustrated at Gaddafi's frequent unwillingness to help Western investors as well as threatening Western plans to advance their military-political-economic position in Africa. Thus, regime change and Gaddafi removal dealt a major blow to African unity and breathed new life into AFRICOM and the West's power in the scramble for control and access in this resource rich but fragmented and militarily weak area.

The performance of the UN and International Criminal Court (ICC) in the Libyan war and regime change program displayed once again their subservience to the imperial powers and their facilitation of Western aggression and war crimes. These imperial powers succeeded in getting R-1973 passed, though it was loaded with bias and thoroughly politicized and hysterical claims of threats to civilians, and crucially gave them authority to commit mayhem and create another failed state. The Chinese and Russians foolishly signed on to this Resolution, apparently not realizing that its "protecting civilians" thrust was a cover that would be immediately violated and that they were contributing to their own ouster from Africa. As the evidence rapidly accumulated that the imperial powers were killing directly and facilitating rebel killings of civilians, and were carrying out and supporting serious war crimes, although these were sometimes recorded by UN personnel on the ground in Libya, there was no UN response or constraint imposed. The reliable Ban Ki-Moon found NATO and rebel behavior beyond reproach (Security Council Resolution 1973, I believe, was strictly enforced within the limit, within the mandate). The UN Human Rights Council removed the Libyan government's representative based on a report from a human rights group affiliated with the Libyan rebels, without requiring evidence or allowing Libya to reply. Ban Ki-Moon allowed rebel representatives to replace those of the Libyan government, again without a hearing and in violation of UN rules.

The ICC performance was even more dismal, with head Luis Moreno-Ocampo rushing to indict Gaddafi without bothering with an investigation, and swallowing the claims of "black mercenaries" being imported by the villain and his supplying Viagra to encourage a rape program (Susan Rice also swallowed this charge). Although R-1973 does call for the ICC to prosecute anybody "responsible for or complicit in attacks targeting the civilian population, including aerial as well as naval attacks," it should not surprise that there was no trace of ICC enforcement against NATO or rebel officials.

Human Rights groups also did poorly, with both Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International welcoming the NATO intervention, although both eventually put out reports calling attention to NATO and rebel abuses. But these reports were weak and bias—"balanced." And in contrast with their very early support of intervention, they failed to call for action against imperial and rebel war crimes. Forte cites compelling evidence that the early figure of 6,000 Gaddafi government killings, which was influential in shaping UN action and media (and liberal-left) opinion, was passed along by the rebels and swallowed by the mainstream with no independent confirmation required.

Forte has a very good account of how effectively the pro-rebel side manufactured claims of civilian abuses via web sites and Twitterers far distant from Libya (London, Geneva, Cairo), but regularly stating the claims were "confirmed" by unnamed "witnesses." These plus direct rebel and imperial power official claims, and a remarkable will-to-believe, helped create a fearsome image of Gaddafi misbehavior and threats. Once again the propaganda system did its job of demonization and hysteria stimulation, with effects possibly exceeding those for Serbia (concentration and rape camps) and Iraq ("weapons of mass destruction" and urgent threat). And a substantial chunk of the Western left succumbed once again, sometimes reluctantly agreeing that bombing to protect civilians was here justified, but remarkably silent in the face of the growing evidence of bombing OF civilians and a de facto race war and war of aggression for regime change.

Forte points out that the facts of a race war and war of aggression against an important African state were clearly recognized by Africans. There was a sharp divide, with African leaders, journals and academics assailing the NATO war and Western elites applauding it. Africans were very conscious of the fact that the UN and NATO powers simply ignored the AU, preferring to deal with the Arab monarchies and the rebels. Forte cites leaders of South Africa, Liberia, Nigeria, Uganda, and other Africans all of whom are strong in their positive, even if sometimes qualified, views of Gaddafi and his role, and outraged at this new spurt of Western intervention (which they often call re-colonization). Forte also has several pages on the close relationship between Mandela and Gaddafi, the former indebted to him because of his steadfast support in the years when the ANC was a "terrorist" organization for the imperial powers.

Forte also stresses throughout how strongly opposed Gaddafi was to Al Qaeda and Islamic extremism. He fought them at home and sought to interest U.S. officials in their threat. It is one of many ironies that Al Qaeda and Islamic extremism, firmly embedded in the rebel ranks, were provided the air force by NATO that ushered these democrats into shared power. They are now a force helping stoke chaos in the "liberated" Libya. But this chaos, like the civilians killed and injured by NATO and its allies, only hurts those victims, not the real villains in Washington, London and Paris.

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