



Written by [Thomas R. Eddlem](#) on March 20, 2011

A Real Cost/Benefit Analysis of Libyan Intervention

President Obama [addressed the nation on March 18](#) to rationalize putting U.S. military pilots in harm's way in Libya. Do his arguments stack up? Obama's arguments should be judged on whether it's "worth it" for a mother to lose her only son toward attaining the stated goal. Sadly, it's not difficult to envision at some not-too-distant time Obama attending the funeral of one or more Air Force pilots and giving a tightly wrapped flag to the mother of a pilot who dies in the line of duty in Libya. Such a conversation between the grieving mother and President Obama could go something like this (all statements attributed to Obama are word-for-word from his [March 18 address on Libya](#)):



President Obama: Once more, they have the thanks of a grateful nation and the admiration of the world.

Future Grieving Mother: My son volunteered to defend his country, not the rest of the world. So I don't care as much for the thanks of the world.

Obama: The United States has worked with our allies and partners to shape a strong international response at the United Nations. The United States is prepared to act as part of an international coalition. American leadership is essential, but that does not mean acting alone — it means shaping the conditions for the international community to act together.

GrievingMother: Why did my son — my only son — have to die?

Obama: Left unchecked, we have every reason to believe that Qaddafi would commit atrocities against his people. Many thousands could die. A humanitarian crisis would ensue. The entire region could be destabilized, endangering many of our allies and partners.

Grieving Mother: Did Qaddafi threaten to attack the United States?

Obama: He launched a military campaign against his own people.

GrievingMother: So there was no threat against America?

Obama: He has demonstrated a willingness to use brute force through his sponsorship of terrorism against the American people as well as others, and through the killings that he has carried out within his own borders.

GrievingMother: Had Qaddafi attacked the United States in the last 20 years?

Obama: Left unchecked, we have every reason to believe that Qaddafi would commit atrocities against his people. Many thousands could die. A humanitarian crisis would ensue. The entire region could be destabilized, endangering many of our allies and partners. The calls of the Libyan



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people for help would go unanswered. The democratic values that we stand for would be overrun.

Grieving Mother: Okay, so my son didn't die defending his country from attack. Did my son at least die to free the Libyan people from a terrible dictator?

Obama: We are not going to use force to go beyond a well-defined goal — specifically, the protection of civilians in Libya.

Grieving Mother: But did he die deposing Qaddafi?

Obama: Ultimately, it will be driven by the people of the Arab World. It is their right and their responsibility to determine their own destiny.

Grieving Mother: So my son didn't even die to make people free?

Obama: We have made clear our support for a set of universal values, and our support for the political and economic change that the people of the region deserve. But I want to be clear: the change in the region will not and cannot be imposed by the United States or any foreign power.

Grieving Mother: So my son didn't die to defend his country, and he didn't even die to make other people free. Did you at least get the Congress — as the will of the American people under the U.S. Constitution — to vote to get behind this decision, [as the Constitution requires](#)? Or did you make this decision all by yourself?

Obama: I have taken this decision.

GrievingMother: Can you at least give me one good reason my son had to die?

Obama: The words of the international community would be rendered hollow. And that's why the United States has worked with our allies and partners to shape a strong international response at the United Nations.

Grieving Mother: So my son died to defend the reputation of the United Nations? That's an outrage!

Obama: Let me close by saying that there is no decision I face as your Commander-in-Chief that I consider as carefully as the decision to ask our men and women to use military force. The United States of America will not stand idly by in the face of actions that undermine global peace and security. So I have taken this decision with the confidence that action is necessary.

Grieving Mother: You value the lives of the military personnel who serve under you too cheaply, Mr. President. My son should not have had to die for a meaningless no-fly-zone line in the sky. It's only "necessary" and worth it to you because it's not your hide and not your children's lives that are on the line.

The above conversation could perhaps be dismissed as fictional, even though, as indicated above, the President's side of the conversation is taken verbatim from his March 18 address to the nation. The President's remarks are the actual arguments he made for putting the lives of American servicemen at risk, and the future grieving mother's side of the conversation is intended to personify the real costs and heartbreak that loved ones of servicemen will have to suffer under his decision. There is nothing fictional about [the arguments](#) — or the heartbreak. Nobody but a pacifist would question the need to sacrifice servicemen in the defense of their nation, if a genuine defense is required, but the Libyan intervention is clearly a different matter than genuine U.S. national defense.



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Photo of President Obama delivering his March 18 address on Libya: AP Images

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