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A no-fly zone in Libya would mean war in Libya

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President Obama can choose war with Moammar Gadhafi, or he can choose to keep the U.S. military out of Libya. But, contrary to claims of Sen. John Kerry and a platoon of pundits, Obama cannot walk a middle line by imposing a "no-fly zone" or staging an antiseptic air campaign.

Imposing a no-fly zone is not a step short of war - it is war. And how many Americans are willing to go to war for Libya?

Many commentators, hoping a no-fly zone would end Gadhafi's air attacks on protesters and rebels, point to the decade-long no-fly rules the United States enforced in Iraq. But Michael Knights, a leading expert on no-fly zones, says that the Iraq model is neither apt nor desirable. Knights, a Lafer fellow in the Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program, wrote his doctoral dissertation on no-fly zones. He says enforcing a no-fly zone "is basically an act of war."

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates seems to agree. "A no-fly zone begins with an attack on Libya to destroy the air defenses." This would include - as Kerry put it on CBS on Sunday - "cratering their runways" to ground their jets. "An attack on Libya," as Gates puts it, which would mean dropping bombs or shooting rockets, is pretty hard to distinguish from war.

On Iraq, it's crucial to remember our no-fly zone there followed Operation Desert Storm - an invasion of Iraq. Knights told me that "no-fly zones are best utilized in countries that you already

have quasi-war relations with," either following a war like Desert Storm or as "preparatory actions" for a war.

And there's no logic behind simply stopping Gadhafi's jets. AP quoted reports Wednesday that Libyan tanks are firing "randomly" on homes in Zawiyah. Gadhafi also has artillery - plenty of it. There's no coherent justification for the U.S. military shutting down Gadhafi's jets but not his howitzers and tanks. If we do no-fly, we also have to do no-tank and no-cannons. You see how things start to get sticky.

Americans could take out Libyan tanks and cannons from the air, but can pilots really tell the difference between a tank driven by a soldier still loyal to Gadhafi and one driven by a rebel soldier? U.S. pilots could easily confuse farmers' tractors for mortars.

And does anyone doubt that Gadhafi is evil enough to put anti-aircraft weapons on the back of a school bus or the roof of a mosque. So do American pilots bomb a mosque or risk getting their jets shot down? War often involves terrible choices like that - which is one reason it's good to stay out of war when you can.

Many of the hawks today calling for a no-fly zone admit they want war with Libya. D.B. Grady, a former paratrooper now a writer at the Atlantic, put bluntly the advantage of a no-fly zone: First the United States would have to clear the zone with attacks on air defenses. "Once the first U.S. missile strikes the first Libyan target, the shock is gone and the stage is set for continued operations. It's far easier to launch the second missile."

But others draw an imaginary line between no-fly and war. Kerry, after advocating the "cratering" of Libyan runways, said on CBS, "The last thing we want to think about is any kind of military intervention. And I don't consider the no-fly zone stepping over that line,"

Some of this talk is just political spin - politicians and laptop generals hoping Americans won't balk at a war if it's not called a war. Iraq hawks pulled the same bait-and-switch tactic in 2002 and early 2003: promising the nation a cakewalk and then scolding President Bush and the American people for lacking the "resolve" for a bloody, protracted occupation.

But the word games also matter because of the so-called "Pottery Store Rule": You break it, you buy it.

What constitutes "breaking" Gadhafi? At what point does the United States "own" the rebuilding of Libya in the way it has responsibility for nation building in Iraq and Afghanistan. Can America "crater" a country's runways, bomb its tanks, blow up its howitzers, and shoot down its jets - and then walk away from the rubble?

Gates apparently doesn't harbor the same illusion Kerry does - that we can flex military muscle in Libya but keep our hands clean. It's like the old saying that you can't be a little bit pregnant. Gates knows a third war in the Muslim world would be tough for our military, tough for our budget and tough for the American people to bear.