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Obama's Fatal Attraction to War

George W. Bush and Barack Obama have more in common than we thought.

Steve Chapman

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It's a good thing we didn't elect John McCain in 2008. A McCain victory would have meant an escalation in Afghanistan, a third war in the Middle East, and a president sending U.S. forces into harm's way heedless of public opinion or congressional power.

Instead, we elected Barack Obama, who firmly rejected military action for purely humanitarian reasons. In his 2002 speech opposing the Iraq war, Obama insisted that though Saddam Hussein "butchers his own people to secure his own power," the war was unjustified.

Hussein, he pointed out, "poses no imminent and direct threat to the United States, or to his neighbors" and "can be contained until, in the way of all petty dictators, he falls away into the dustbin of history."

In 2008, we saw debates between Obama and his rival contenders. Now we are seeing a debate between Obama the candidate and Obama the president.

Candidate Obama was firm in his opposition to the Iraq war. President Obama was against going into Libya before he was in favor of it. The former said the president may not legally strike a country that hasn't attacked or presented a threat to us. The latter bombed a country that had done neither.

Obama's defenders insist that what he did in starting the Libya war is not as bad as what President George W. Bush did in starting the Iraq war. True: In some ways, what Obama did is worse.

Bush made the case for removing Hussein over months. Bush got approval from Congress. Bush acted against a dictator who aspired to acquire nuclear weapons. He invaded a country of large strategic value. He stated plainly the purpose of the invasion.

Obama did none of those things. He rushed into a war, ignoring Congress, to punish a ruler who had abandoned his nuclear ambitions, in a country of peripheral importance.

And he did it without being clear on what would constitute success: just averting the slaughter of the rebels or also toppling Moammar Gadhafi from power. Obama says Gadhafi has to go. The United Nations resolution authorizing the attack says nothing of the sort.

Obama's war doesn't pose the heavy risk of a bloody, long-term occupation. Like Bush's, though, it rests on wishful thinking and ignorance.

The hope is that a no-fly zone will turn the military tide against Gadhafi or at least prevent the rebels from being wiped out. But they do not look capable of taking the fight to him, and a stalemate would require a long-term commitment at odds with Obama's plan to do this in "days, not weeks."

We may find it hard to avoid plunging in further. *The Washington Post* Wednesday reported "little evidence that the attacks had stopped regime forces from killing civilians." If the air strikes fail at that objective, Obama will find it hard to walk away.

But suppose our allies do win? Obama may be wrong in thinking they would be an improvement. "It could be a very big surprise when Gadhafi leaves and we find out who we are really dealing with," Libya scholar Paul Sullivan of Georgetown University told *The New York Times*.

What is clear today is that there is only one party in American politics. That is the war party—which, like Major League Baseball, is arbitrarily divided into two groups engaged in the same game. Military restraint is the equivalent of cricket: a quaint, incomprehensible pastime that will never take root here.

Candidates for the highest office may champion peace and prosperity. But presidents no longer strive for peace. War has become the default response to unpleasant events abroad.