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Doug Feith: "The President wants to cut America down to size"

Doug Feith served as Under Secretary of Defense for Policy for President George W. Bush from July 2001 until August 2005, where he worked closely with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and other senior administration officials on U.S. policy from Afghanistan to Iraq. (Fareed highlighted an incredible April 7, 2003 memo Rumsfeld sent Feith basically asking him to solve the world's most intractable problems in a few lines.) Feith is also the author of War and Decision: Inside the Pentagon at the Dawn of the War on Terrorism, and director of the Center for National Security Strategies at the Hudson Institute.

I talked with Feith this afternoon about American foreign policy in the Middle East. Here's an edited transcript of what Feith had to say about President Obama's motivations for intervention in Libya.

"Most people are analyzing U.S. action in Libya in a way that makes what President Obama is doing seem incomprehensible. If the President says Gadhafi must go and believes it is important enough to engage our military to achieve this objective, why would he wait two or three weeks before making a stand? If the President's goal is to protect civilians in Libya, how can he be willing to let Gadhafi - the source of the humanitarian danger in Libya - remain in power after the operation ends?

"Pundits are puzzled because they assume President Obama is focused on Libya. But that assumption may be false.

"The only way to make the President's behavior comprehensible is to recognize that he has a larger strategic goal than just the outcome of Libya. While the rest of the country is focused on Libya's future, the President is focused on fundamentally changing America's role and standing in the world. Libya, for him, is simply an occasion for undertaking a radical reformulation of 70 years of American foreign policy.

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"At least since the U.S. entered World War II, there has been a view of the United States as a leading power, a democratic power, a country that acts boldly in its own interests. I think President Obama does not believe that's the role America should play in the world.

"Had the Arab League vote, the push by the French and British and the UN vote not lined up as they did, the intervention in Libya wouldn't have happened. This means that whatever happens in Libya is less important to the President than these other factors.

"The President is saying that as important as Libya is, it is not as important as the principle that the U.S. should not act independently. He is saying, 'I'm willing to intervene in Libya only if I can do it in a way that establishes the principle that America does not act unilaterally, independently or simply for American interests. We only act within multilateral contexts. We try not to take the lead and when we do have to assert leadership, we do not hold it for very long. We transfer leadership early.'

"Essentially, the President wants to cut America down to size - he would say make America a better citizen of the world. But what he is talking about is moving America away from a position of leadership.

"This explains why the President missed a major opportunity two to three weeks ago to seize on the momentum of the rebels to defeat Gadhafi. Unlike other countries that acted earlier to support the rebels, the President did not recognize the rebels, arm them or provide other forms of support. He did not want to act without the United Nations.

"Over the next two to three weeks, Gadhafi turned the tide and recaptured virtually all the ground he had lost. Only when he was on the verge of wiping out rebels - and only after the international community had come together - did President Obama act.

"What President Obama is doing is very risky. He is taking an important military action in a circumstance that he does not consider to be very important. He's gone out of his way to emphasize that we shouldn't consider it too important either - waiting for the UN, emphasizing limitations on our means, and stressing that he does not want to lead the operation.

"The President said at the outset that we are not going in on the ground. But if he had the strategic goal of removing Gadhafi from power, the smart thing to do would be to say that that was the goal, and to stress our determination to achieve it.

"Instead, he has signaled to the Libyan people that if the going gets hard, America won't escalate its efforts and will therefore settle for a more modest goal than ousting Gadhafi. Even if President Obama has no intention of sending in ground forces, it doesn't serve U.S. purposes to announce that because it sends a negative message to Libyan people, whom we are trying to motivate.

"But - and here is the key point - President Obama is less interested in motivating Libyans to overthrow Gadhafi than in establishing the principle of constrained American action.

"This is why many American commentators have said they lack confidence in the President regarding Libya.

"Now he may turn out to be lucky in Libya. Tomorrow Gadhafi could get a bullet in his head from somebody in Libya. Everything may turn out well. That would be good for America and good for the world. But that would not be the result of our action. It would just be good luck."

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