

Senator Webb: Libya Mission Leaves Endpoint Undefined and Lacks Clarity

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Senator Jim Webb, who has repeatedly cautioned about military action in Libya, spoke with Andrea Mitchell regarding his concerns about recent developments in Libya.

The transcript is below:

Andrea Mitchell Reports Transcript- Libya

Andrea Mitchell: With us now, Virginia Democratic Senator James Webb, a member of the Armed Services Committee and a Vietnam veteran, former Navy Secretary, and someone very familiar with exactly what is going on in the field today. Senator, are you comfortable with the command structure and with the role the U.S. is playing?

Senator Jim Webb: If we're going to discuss what's going on in Libya now and in the future, you have to start with three basic considerations. The first is we have a military operation that's been put into play, but we do not have a clear diplomatic policy or a clear statement of foreign policy that is accompanying this military operation.

The second, and the questions you were just asking are some that I've asked on the Foreign Relations Committee and the Armed Services Committee, is we know we don't like the Gadhafi regime, but we do not have a clear picture of who the opposition movement really is. I've asked this repeatedly to State Department officials, including Secretary Clinton in the past couple of weeks.

The third is, yes, we got a vote from the U.N. Security Council in order to put this into play, but we had five key abstentions in that vote: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and Germany. And we have not put this issue in front of the American people in any meaningful way; the President's in Rio, the Congress is out of session. So before we even get into the command structure of this, I think it's very clear to put the marker down that moving forward, we need to get more involved in terms of anything that goes from this point forward.

Mitchell: And the key factor Secretary Clinton told us—the game changer—was the Arab League's endorsement. But we saw yesterday they were wavering, they had to be reeled back in. Qatar has proposed putting some air flights into this mission, but they have yet to show up or are not yet operational. And they're the only ones. Is that real buy in from the Arab League?

Webb: I would agree with that concern, but a concern that I have is that we have been sort of on auto-pilot for almost ten years in terms of presidential authority in conducting these types of military operations absent the meaningful participation of the Congress. We have not had a debate and I know that there was some justification put into place because of concern for civilian casualties, but this isn't the way that our system is supposed to work.

Mitchell: What about the diplomatic mission taking you back to one of the first points you made. Do you know what the mission is? I know they can't say so, they don't have legal authority for it, but after last night's strike on the compound, do you think the mission really is to take out Gadhafi? What if this ends and Gadhafi is still in power? What then have we bought into?

Webb: I think you saw Admiral Mullen being very careful yesterday in terms of narrowing his responses—basically saying we've been given a military mission, and we're going to do that, and we're not really sure what the diplomatic endpoint is going to be. And I think the President and the Secretary of State have a very clear obligation now to come forward to the American people and to the Congress and state clearly what they believe the endpoint of this should be. They haven't done that.

Mitchell: And what about turning over the command? Do you think that it's important for the U.S. not to be the lead here? But in terms of the high tech weapons, we clearly are the leader. Britain has obviously great assets, as well as does France.

Webb: I really don't believe that we have an obligation to get involved in every single occurrence in that part of the world. And this issue is of much more economic importance, quite frankly, to Britain and France. Libyan oil, even though it's only 2% of the world's output, is a very light oil. It's much more easily refined and the factories in Europe are not geared up for some of the heavier crude that comes out of Saudi Arabia, for instance. They have much more of an interest in terms of conducting military operations. We don't have to get involved in every one of these.

Mitchell: Senator Jim Webb, thank you so much.