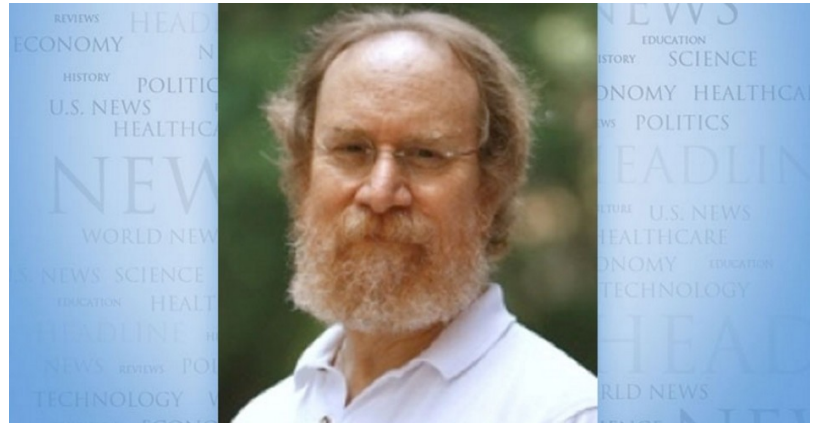




Written by [Sheldon Richman](#) on January 25, 2013

Mali: Here We Go Again

In testimony before Senate and House committees, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton enthusiastically endorsed increased U.S. intervention in Africa. When government officials seem incapable of learning obvious lessons from the recent past, maybe their incentive is *not* to learn but to keep doing the same destructive things.



[President Obama's inaugural speech](#) contained this line, which has gone quite overlooked: "America will remain the anchor of strong alliances in every corner of the globe. And we will renew those institutions that extend our capacity to manage crisis abroad."

That's a recipe for perpetual war and perpetual fiscal crisis.

The latest locale for American intervention is the west African country of Mali. Aside from whatever covert activity the U.S. government may be conducting there, the American role is said to consist of logistical support for France, Mali's former colonial overlord, which has intervened militarily to defend a central corrupt government. (The deadly hostage-takings in Algeria may have been retaliation for France's action.) As the [New York Times reports](#), "The Pentagon is airlifting a French battalion to join the fight in Mali against Islamist militants, Pentagon and administration officials said." Ominously, the *Times* adds, "The airlift expands the involvement of the United States in support of a NATO ally, but officials stressed that the American military footprint on the ground in Mali would remain small." That is, there's already an American footprint on the ground.



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Such is how quagmires begin.

What's going on in Mali that requires U.S. meddling? It's a complicated and murky story that goes back to the repression of the separatist ethnic group, the Tuaregs, in northern Mali and, writes Jeremy Keenan, the [Algerian government's effort](#) after Sept. 11, 2001, to concoct a "terrorist threat" to motivate the U.S. government to pay for modernization of its army. Seeing Africa as a rich source of oil, gas, and other resources, the Bush administration was happy to get involved in the region. (Got to keep the Chinese away.)

While the Obama administration sounds alarms about al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), reporter [Patrick Cockburn](#) notes that

Tuareg nationalist insurgency, not radical Islam, is at the heart of the crisis in Mali. What, for instance, are AQIM doing in northern Mali, which has never in the past been a bastion for fundamentalists? AQIM is in origin an Algerian movement that emerged from the civil war of the 1990s. Formed in 1998, its members moved to northern Mali in 2003, where the government saw it as a counterbalance to Tuareg separatists....

The strange truth is that it was the Malian government which, over the last 10 years, tolerated AQIM in northern Mali and allowed it to operate, taking a share in the profits of its kidnapping and drug-running operations. International military aid for use against al-Qa'ida was diverted for use against the Tuareg.

A key precursor to the latest episode was the 2011 U.S. and NATO intervention in Libya, which overthrew the government of Muammar Qaddafi and provided a cornucopia of weapons. When the regime-change operation ended, well-armed Tuaregs, who had fought for Qaddafi, returned to northern Mali to pursue their separatist aims. After expelling the central government's army, they declared independence last April, after a coup overthrew the government in Bamako. Tuaregs also live in neighboring Algeria, Niger, Libya, and Burkina Faso, and a successful separatist movement in Mali could spread throughout the region, which those countries would abhor.

The Tuareg movement, Keenan writes, was co-opted by jihadists linked to the Algerian intelligence service, and these jihadists have imposed sharia law and have committed horrendous violence. Thus, he wrote, "Washington's Global War on Terror has come home to roost for the peoples of the Sahara."

These events now provide the excuse for the latest Western intervention. When will it end?



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The lesson is clear: Internationalizing local, often ethnic, conflicts has consequences that furnish the pretext for further intervention. Inevitably, innocents are killed, while the American power elite pursues its geopolitical aims and the military-industrial complex prospers.

Moreover, intervention — once again on behalf of a corrupt and brutal government — makes enemies of those who would otherwise present no threat to the American people. Nothing helps jihadi recruitment like Western occupation.

As a cover for imperialism, the war on terror has worn thin.

Sheldon Richman is vice president and editor at [The Future of Freedom Foundation](#) in Fairfax, Va.



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