

Land says jury out on whether war in Libya is just

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NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) – Southern Baptists’ top public-policy expert said April 2 that whether or not President Obama’s action in Libya meets moral standards for a “just” war depends in part on approval by Congress.

Richard Land

Richard Land, head of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said on his weekly radio program that military action underway against Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi would appear to meet many of the “just war” criteria used by Christians for centuries that recognize war is sometimes a necessary evil that can be moral if carefully waged to prevent a greater evil.

But Land said the president thus far is “way off the reservation” in at least one regard. In order for a war to be morally just, he said, it must be fought with legitimate authority.

“The use of military force is only the prerogative of governments,” Land said. “Romans 13:1-4 give the divinely ordained civil magistrate a monopoly on the use of state-sanctioned lethal force: internally the police and externally military force. Consequently only the duly constituted civil authority can legitimize military action.”

“However helpful, however nice or comforting the United Nations Security Council vote may be, the only duly constituted authority for the United States military forces is the government of the United States,” Land continued, “and the authorizing vehicle is either a declaration of war or a special joint resolution of the U.S. Congress.”

Land said Obama is “way out of line” for not going to Congress to ask for support for the use of military action in Libya. If he fails do so within either 60 or 90 days, Land said Obama will have broken the law under the War Powers Act enacted in 1973.

“I think the War Powers Act is a good idea, in that it gives the president the ability to react immediately to a situation,” Land said. “I personally think that the president’s intervention in Libya militarily came pretty late. He allowed Qaddafi’s army to make some advances they probably shouldn’t have been allowed to make and kill people that they shouldn’t have been allowed to kill.”

Land said the problem lies in what the president didn’t do. He said Obama should have at least said in his speech the previous Monday, “Now I am going to the Congress and I am asking the Congress for authorization to support what we have done and what we are doing.”

“I believe that given the proper answers to questions that the Congress would probably support the president,” Land said. “But his not going to them shows a lack of respect for the Congress. It shows a lack of respect for the law, and with every passing day that goes by that he does not go to the Congress, he is arguing that a Security Council resolution by the United Nations is sufficient. It is not. Once he has gone beyond the War Powers Act’s limitations, he is breaking the law, and he is weakening the sovereignty of the United States.”

“It is the elected officials of the United States — not the president alone, not the Security Council and the president alone — that decide when and if and under what circumstances American combat troops can be brought into a situation where they are put in harm’s way for more than a very short period of time,” Land said.

Land said he believes taking out Qaddafi constitutes a “just cause” for war.

“If the president had not intervened, we would have been forced to watch incidents of mass murder,” Land said.

Land said other requirements are harder to gauge without knowing the likelihood of bringing Qaddafi to justice and replacing him with a western-style democracy instead of another dictator.

“Could it be justifiable by just-war criteria? Yes it could be,” Land said. “Will it be? It depends upon whether the president seeks the approval of Congress and gets it and it depends on the outcome.”

-Bob Allen is senior writer for Associated Baptist Press.

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