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# The Politics of Presidential Credibility

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# THE POLITICS OF PRESIDENTIAL CREDIBILITY

A thesis presented

by

**William C. Winter**

to

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Thesis Advisor

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## INTRODUCTION

In our political system, the public expects its elected leaders to tell the truth. Casting a long shadow over the American political landscape, the U.S. Presidency is seen not only as the most powerful political office in the western world, but a position with the capacity for great moral leadership. In our contemporary political discourse, the promotion of alternative facts, fake news, and a general assault on the truth has demonstrated the importance of examining presidential credibility and the political consequences a president faces when he misleads the American public. Although, a substantial amount of academic research presently exists on issues of truthfulness within American politics, a great deal of that literature focuses on declining rates of overall trust in institutions (Pew Research Center 2015). Current scholarship does not explain the political consequences of presidential credibility in a comparative way.

In this work, a comparative approach is employed to the study of presidential credibility. The first case study examines the domestic political implications that President George H.W. Bush faced after breaking his infamous 1988 campaign promise to not raise taxes. The second case study investigates the role that the United States played in removing Colonel Muammar Gaddafi during the 2011 Libyan intervention. This chapter evaluates the degree to which the Obama administration's policy in Libya misled the American public into believing the U.S. military role was restricted to a humanitarian mission, rather than a classic regime change operation which ended with Gaddafi out of power.

Credibility means believability. The ability of the president to be perceived as believable by the American public largely decides his political fate. Yet, judgments made

outside the realm of public opinion matter to the political fortunes of a president. Political elites and the media are indispensable in holding president's accountable for their actions. In both the Bush and Obama case, the ability of the media to assert itself into the public debate and shape the country's notion of the president's credibility on the respective issues was critical to how the president was perceived and, in turn, the consequences he faced for his decisions.

Throughout U.S. history, presidential success and failure has been shaped by public concerns over honesty and candidness. However, the issue of presidential credibility has arguably never been given more attention and weight than it is today. This work presents the reader with two case studies in how credibility problems for U.S. presidents locate themselves in both the domestic and foreign space.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

*Research Question:* Under what circumstances does the president face political consequences for lying?

Current academic scholarship does not thoughtfully explain the political consequences of presidential credibility over multiple presidential administrations. This project examines two case studies of presidential credibility. One case study exists in the domestic political realm while the other case is devoted to presidential credibility in foreign policy decision-making. To the extent that a credibility problem exists, this work hopes to expand our collective understanding of the political price U.S. president's pay for misleading the American public. *Political price* can be evaluated by employing a three-pronged assessment of presidential approval ratings and/or relevant public polling data, measuring elite public opinion through a content analysis of editorial pieces from newspaper publications, and a review of other relevant publications of the time period.

### **PRESIDENTIAL HONESTY & CHARACTER**

A great deal of existing academic literature devoted to presidential credibility views the issue through the lens of moral and ethical leadership (Bishin Stevens, Wilson 2000; Goldman 1952; Pfiffner 2008; Wasserman 2010). Asking if a president can be both politically effective and ethical, Wasserman evaluates moral behavior as a feature of presidential leadership (Wasserman 2010). Assessing the performance of past presidents based on character, virtue, and ethics, the author provokes the question as to whether president's can govern without lying (Wasserman 2010, 2). Wasserman's argument treats the derelictions of past presidents as moral judgments that fail to appreciate the political

consequences which are undoubtedly an important component to the narrative of presidential credibility.

The complicated nature of presidential decision making often tempts presidents to misrepresent inconvenient truths (Galston 2010). Thompson drives at this point when he describes presidential honesty within the paradigm of “constitutional character” (Thompson 2010, 23). This concept evaluates the willingness of presidents to accept responsibility, tolerate opposition, and commit to candor with the public as measures of moral leadership (Thompson 2010). In short, the nature of this scholarship aims to describe presidential deception as failures in moral and ethical efficacy.

Whereas Thompson uses constitutional character as a means of constructing the virtues of presidential leadership, Galston expands on perceived distinctions between public and private virtue by locating presidential leadership in the context of “ethical realism” (Galston 2010, 99). Galston asserts that complications emerge when assessing presidential leadership due to the “multidimensional character of the presidential office and by the variety of challenges that the president confronts” (Galston 2010, 99). This article suggests that presidents cannot “attain or maintain power if they say what they believe in the bluntest possible terms” (Galston 2010, 99). The author argues that politicians must balance public insistence of candor with the competing desire of human beings for limited truths. These competing visions of presidential leadership offer persuasive arguments for both good moral character as well as presidential morality tempered by realism (Galston 2010). Having said that, the limited explanation of the political effect that the misrepresentation of truth has on presidential governing restricts a meaningful discussion of how it affects a president’s credibility.

## **CREDIBILITY & LYING**

Presidents can never entirely level with the American people. As Richard Nixon said in his post-presidency years, there is an “importance and necessity of secrecy in the performance of the presidential role” (Wilson 2015, 59). However, several academics have argued that there are several ways in which presidents can avoid telling the public the truth (Pfiffner 2008; Cannon 2007; Thompson 2010; Wilson 2015). Pfiffner offers a means to quantify presidential deceptions through a process of categorizing lies (Pfiffner 2008). The author breaks presidential lies into three broad categories: justifiable lies, lies to prevent embarrassment (including some serious breaches of the public trust), and lies of policy deception (Pfiffner 2008). The thrust of his argument centers around the distinction between covert actions and covert policies.

In a similar vein, Cannon focuses on the different types of lies. The author writes that there are “‘white lies’ told for social convenience or to spare feelings, ‘excuses’ that are only half true but that rationalize our own behavior, lies told during a crisis, lies told to liars, paternalistic lies told to those we care about, and lies told for the social good—also known as ‘noble lies’” (Cannon 2008, 58). Noting that presidential prevarications are often justified in the same way as normal individuals, Cannon acknowledges the enormity of presidential responsibilities, which, at times, require talents not consistent with truthfulness (Cannon 2008).

In addition, Cannon also argues that the most salient lies told by U.S. presidents are those which seek to preserve or promote policies or actions, which the author refers to as governing lies (Cannon 2008). This type of lie is “more consequential, and it is by their consequences that they should be judged, as the American public harshly judged the



lies told about the Vietnam War and about Watergate” (Cannon 2008, 59). For example, the result of governing lies during the 1970s led to “a profound change in how much deceit the public—and the media—would tolerate from the Oval Office” (Cannon 2008, 59). Similar to the scholarly work described above, Thompson is principally concerned with what he classifies as “institutional deception,” compared to the individual lies that presidents tell which are not necessarily important to the business of government (Thompson 2010, 23). As it relates to the different types of lies presidents tell the American public, Thompson locates his argument within an institutional framework that places an importance on the moral integrity of the presidency as an entity.

### **SCHOLARSHIP ON FOREIGN POLICY DECEPTION**

The most significant foreign policy decision a president can make is going to war. In this respect, multiple academics have argued that presidential lying is most consequential in foreign policy decision making (Alterman 2005; Cannon 2007; Fisher 2010; Schlesinger 1973). Yet, under false or misleading information, a president compromises the ability of the public to make an informed decision on a fundamental policy concern, which fits into the narrative of presidential credibility. Eric Alterman’s book on presidential deception and its consequences is grounded in this idea of a critical question that will decide matters of war and peace for the country (Alterman 2005). The author posits that the American political system operates under an “unstated assumption that a certain amount of presidential lying to the public by our president and other politicians has become a given in U.S. politics” (Alterman 2005, 4). More broadly, the author appears to suggest the need for presidents to lie in certain instances. The author focuses on “clear and unambiguous falsehood[s] to the country and to Congress regarding

a crucial question of war and peace” (4). Studying Franklin Roosevelt and the Yalta accords, John F. Kennedy and the Cuban Missile Crisis, Lyndon Johnson and his involvement in the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, as well as Ronald Reagan’s foreign policy actions in Central America, the author situates these four “key presidential lies” in the context of a crucial security policy question confronting the country (4). This report adopts a distinct model of evaluating individual presidential lies and the broader political effect they have on the presidency.

### **PRESIDENTIAL LEADERSHIP**

Academic projects devoted to understanding the U.S. presidency must balance demands for quantitative assessment with an historical sense of judgment, particularly as it relates to capturing the essence of lies and the political consequences for a president over time. Robert Dallek’s book *Hail To The Chief: The Making and Unmaking of American Presidents* evaluates several presidencies. The historical contextualizing of presidential success and failure based on notions of vision, political skill, and transparency is pertinent to the general thrust of this thesis (Dallek 1993). Dallek writes expansively on the value of presidential credibility and the president’s role as a moral authority that can rally the country behind a common purpose (Dallek 1993), which is relevant to this work when considering if that shared policy purpose was eventually considered a lie (lowering taxes, foreign intervention).

Presidential success is significantly dependent on the credibility of the officeholder. Stephen Skowronek and Richard E. Neustadt are widely considered the premiere academic scholars in studying the presidency. Yet, Skowronek and Neustadt possess separate notions of what shapes a successful presidency and how political

viability is maintained within the American system. Stephen Skowronek conceptualizes presidential power as the ability of a president to legitimize his actions in *political time* (Skowronek 2011). Political time can be defined as the relationship a president creates with existing commitments of ideology, interest, and authority (Skowronek 2011). The author views the political impact of presidential action and its broader implications for the American political system through this lens of *time*, writing “whether it is possible to observe across the broad history of leadership efforts something more systematic about the political impact of presidential action *in time* and *over time*” (Skowronek 2011, 23). From the author’s perspective, a great deal of presidential success depends on the ways in which a president legitimates his actions (Skowronek 2011, 23). The political time thesis captures unifying themes of leadership that can be applied to problems of presidential honesty. Moreover, a president’s capacity to legitimate statements or policy actions, either transparent or misleading, has a direct effect on the political consequences he may confront if those policy actions damage his credibility. The larger, systematic effect of presidential decisions on the political system over time is more impactful than the policy decisions of individual presidents (Skowronek 2011, 23). Connecting notions of deception with a president’s policy commitments is one way of modeling how political consequences develop during times of presidential lying.

Richard Neustadt’s work is a classic in understanding the individual effectiveness of presidents based on notions of political skill and personality. Neustadt locates presidential power as not only the ability to persuade and bargain, but to continuously evaluate the consequences that a president’s decisions will have on his future prospects for the exercise of power (Neustadt 1992). Neustadt’s concept of presidential leadership

is not only fixed in the idea of the bargaining president but borne out of the constant strategic balance of calculating presidential persuasion and rhetorical appeals that advance certain political goals (Neustadt 1992).

### **CONTRIBUTION**

The American public, regardless of party preference or a particular ideological adherence, looks to their presidents for moral guidance in times of national and political crisis (Goldman 1952). Voters expects a devotion to basic values by their presidents, which include the conveying of fundamental truths (Bishin Stevens, Wilson 2000). As Newman and Davis argue, perceptions of presidential greatness are largely dependent on the two factors of strong character and intellectual brilliance (Newman and Davis 2016). The authors point out that the more positive expert views of character, the higher the president will be rated in terms of historical judgment (Newman and Davis 2016). Yet, if a credibility crisis emerges as a result of presidential dishonesty, what is the larger impact on the presidency as an institution?

It is my desire to demonstrate through previous literature, a content analysis of editorial pieces from major American newspapers, and available public polling, how presidential credibility affects the political consequences of a president. A content analysis of newspaper editorials will afford the opportunity to determine how president policies that possibly constituted a credibility issue were received by political elites at the time. Public polling that deals with a president's approval rating, the specific policy being investigated, and general surveys of believability will offer a basic understanding of how the American public viewed their president during times where credibility was questioned. In the final analysis, understanding the truth in absolute terms is impossible,

particularly when studying an institution as complex as the American presidency. Rather, the goal of this project is to close the academic void with regard to the political consequences presidents face when they face credibility crisis'.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *“No New Taxes:” George H.W. Bush*

In our political system, the public expects its elected leaders to tell the truth. Casting a long shadow over the American political landscape, many argue that the U.S. presidency is viewed not only as the most powerful political office in the western world, but a position with the capacity for great moral leadership. Consequently, when our presidents do not tell the truth or are less than transparent in their ultimate policy aims, what political consequences do they face? A presidential lie can be defined as knowingly making a false statement, either with the explicit intention that the statement be believed as true or with previous knowledge that a statement cannot be supported by fact (Alterman 2005). This chapter examines the “no new taxes” pledge that President George H.W. Bush made in the 1988 presidential campaign. As a result of his campaign promise and the ultimate policy commitments which violated “no new taxes,” to what extent did President Bush pay a political price for misleading the American public? The methods employed to define *political price* are an analysis of elite political opinion, polling, and the inclusion of additional primary sources (interviews, historical research, etc.). Ultimately, this work seeks to answer the deeper question of the meaningful political implications that emerge when American presidents do not tell the truth.

Vice President George H.W. Bush’s campaign pledge not to raise taxes began during the Republican primary season and was widely aired in television advertisements as well as candidate appearances in several early primaries (Shaw 2014). Facing the political reality of conservatism in which tax-cutting was a central policy principle, Bush understood the purist worldview of Republicanism in the Reagan era that rejected deficit

reduction through spending cuts and tax revenue increases (Meacham 2015). Beginning in the Republican primary in early 1988, Bush sought to make the subject of rejecting tax increases an issue of presidential leadership and character. In that vein, his commitment to lowering taxes, or at least maintaining existing personal rates, would be an extension of his political credibility as a president governing in a conservative age. A rising Mississippi politician who came to the United States Senate the same year George Herbert Walker Bush was elected president, Republican Trent Lott said that he thought Bush was fully committed to keeping taxes at existing rates. “I believe he thought he could keep this promise. And a lot of us Republicans in the Congress expected him to do so. He campaigned on it and many of us believed his credibility was at stake. We firmly believed in this policy too” (author interview [hereinafter referred to as “Lott interview”]). However, the responsibilities of governing would test Bush’s political commitment. Likewise, the president’s ultimate breaking of his pledge would challenge a fragile political coalition between the White House and congressional conservatives who believed the Bush administration was too moderate for their brand of Republicanism.

## **BACKGROUND**

In the 1980s, annual deficits and a ballooning national debt was setting the United States’ fiscal policy on an untenable trajectory (Greenspan 2008). In 1987, Yale historian Paul Kennedy penned a bestselling work, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000*, which asserted that uncontrollable debt and the economic leveraging of great powers was a direct result of their decline (Kennedy 1987). In 1980, the national debt stood at over \$900 billion (U.S. Treasury Figures). By the time President Reagan left office in January 1989, the debt was

slightly under \$3 trillion (U.S. Treasury Figures). Kennedy's thesis was in the minds of economic policymakers who were concerned that the tripling of the national debt between fiscal years 1980 and 1989 was a harbinger to American economic decline in the world (Meacham 2015). Yet, while Bush was committing himself to running on a conservative platform for the presidential nomination, he understood from a policy position that the nation's political leaders would have to confront the country's unsustainable fiscal path (Meacham 2015). This required spending reductions and revenue increases for long-term deficit control. <sup>1</sup>However, Bush was the vice-president to a man whose presidential ambitions had been propelled by non-traditional economic theories (Meacham 2015). One could argue that Bush understood his political attraction rested on appealing to the conservative activist branch of the Republican Party, which believed low tax rates and minimal regulatory oversight generated economic growth. In time, existing political commitments and the responsibilities of governing would force a decision on the growing deficit problem.

## **RACE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE**

The first time Bush employed the issue of taxes as a political weapon was during the primary season in New Hampshire in both television advertisements and candidate appearances (Walsh 1988). He understood that he had to consolidate the support of the conservative right, which had propelled Ronald Reagan's candidacy to the White House eight years earlier, in order to win the Republican nomination (Meacham 2015). Facing

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<sup>1</sup> "Slaying the Dragon of Debt: Fiscal Politics and Policy from the 1970s to the Present." 1990 Budget Enforcement Act. University of California, Berkeley. The Bancroft Library. [Hereinafter referred to as "Slaying the Dragon of Debt: Fiscal Politics and Policy from the 1970s to the Present."]



Kansas Senator Bob Dole, Bush leveled an effective advertising assault against Dole in which he portrayed the senator as a prevaricator who could not stand his ground against tax increases (Fletcher 1996). Airing a week before the New Hampshire primary on 16 February 1988, the advertising spot labeled Dole as “Senator Straddle,” branding him as an unprincipled politician who could not be trusted with upholding conservative principles when it came to tax policy (Smith 2007). The thrust of Bush’s campaign ad accused Dole of refusing to sign a pledge opposing new taxes (Fletcher 1996).

Acknowledging that his presidential ambitions had collapsed, Dole subsequently ended his campaign for president on March 29, 1988 (Meacham 2015). Years later, when asked if Bush’s advertising campaign damaged his candidacy, Dole responded, “it really hurt” (Smith 2007). The former Senate majority leader added that the “Senator Straddle” spot along with Bush’s more personal campaign style in New Hampshire hampered Dole’s own credibility as a conservative in an increasingly conservative political environment (Smith 2007). At last, the Bush camp had witnessed the potency of using the issue of taxes as a political weapon.

By the time the primary campaign concluded in the late spring of 1988, Bush’s team needed an effective strategy heading into the general election. In July of 1988, as Bush was the presumed nominee of the Republican Party, a public opinion poll showed that thirty-eight percent of voters preferred Bush, while fifty-five percent favored the Democratic nominee, Governor Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts (Gallup). Bush had to change the state of his polling. Describing his campaign strategy against Dukakis a month earlier in his personal diary, Bush wrote that “it will be easy to paint him for what he truly is—a Massachusetts liberal” (Meacham 2015). In this fashion, Bush’s attacks on

Dukakis's economic policies, principally that the liberal Dukakis was more willing to raise taxes, would be central to his campaign platform.

The 1988 Republican National Convention was the venue in which Bush most prominently displayed his campaign promise of rejecting any tax increase measures. In his acceptance speech on August 18, 1988, Bush proclaimed, "I'm the one who will not raise taxes. My opponent now says he'll raise them as a last resort or a third resort. When a politician talks like that, you know that's one resort he'll be checking into."<sup>2</sup> Bush continued, "[m]y opponent won't rule out raising taxes, but I will, and the Congress will push me to raise taxes, and I'll say no, and they'll push, and I'll say no, and they'll push again, and I'll say to them."<sup>3</sup> The most famous phrase from Bush's speech entered the American political lexicon in which the Republican presidential nominee proudly declared, "*Read my lips: no new taxes.*"<sup>4</sup> This line from Bush's speech establishes the fact that he was basing his political credibility as a conservative politician on a policy promise of not raising taxes. While this political pledge was most vocally expressed by Bush in his acceptance speech, the 1988 Republican Party platform also made opposition towards additional tax measures a central feature of their plank.<sup>5</sup> Under the section titled "Reducing the Burden of Taxes," the party platform stated that "[w]e oppose any attempts to increase taxes. Tax increases harm the economic expansion and reverse the trend to restoring control of the economy to individual Americans."<sup>6</sup> Thus, it was not only Bush who made this promise, but official Republican Party policies that defined

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<sup>2</sup> John Woolley and Gerhard Peters. Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans. The American Presidency Project. University of California, Santa Barbara. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>. Since 1999. [Hereinafter referred to as "Republican Convention Speech 1988."]

<sup>3</sup> Republican Convention Speech 1988.

<sup>4</sup> Republican Convention Speech 1988

<sup>5</sup> The American Presidency Project. August 16, 1988. "Republican Party Platform of 1988." Political Party Platforms. University of California, Santa Barbara. [Hereinafter referred to as "Republican Party Platform of 1988."]

<sup>6</sup> Republican Convention Speech 1988.

credibility as keeping taxes at existing levels.<sup>7</sup> In this regard, the party plank demonstrates that both Bush and the Republican Party had in part established a political coalition premised on maintaining low tax rates.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The polling data used for this project was accessed using the *Roper Center iPoll* online database through Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut. The search terms consisted of *Bush, Dukakis, taxes, spending, deficit, debt, credibility, leadership, and lie*. In several instances, key search terms were paired together to produce new archival items. The historical time frame applied to the search of these polls was January 1998, which marked the beginning of the 1988 presidential campaign, to July 1990, which was the general date in which Bush reversed his policy on taxes.

Polling data suggests that Bush's campaign promise of opposing new taxes had an impact on public perceptions as to which candidate would most likely raise taxes. To the extent that polling data can confirm that voters saw Bush's "no new taxes" plan as a definitive policy promise, the data included within this project demonstrates that his statements, at least, resonated with the electorate. For example, a CBS News Poll conducted between July 31 and August 3, 1988, which was before Bush's convention speech, asked respondents, "Do you think it is more likely that taxes would be raised in a Bush administration, or in a Dukakis administration, or isn't there likely to be any difference when it comes to raising taxes" (CBS News Poll). Nine percent answered Bush, twenty-seven percent said Dukakis, and fifty-five percent said there would be no difference (CBS News Poll). This eighteen-point gap divide between Bush and Dukakis

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<sup>7</sup> Republican Party Platform of 1988.

would only grow over time. However, after Bush's nomination, the same poll suggested his acceptance speech had a slight impact on how voters measured each candidates' commitment to the politically salient tax issue (Woolley and Peters). That poll, conducted again between August 19-21, which was one day after Bush's acceptance speech in New Orleans, revealed that Bush had lowered voter concerns about the possibility of revenue increases from nine percent to eight percent (CBS News Poll). Contrastingly, thirty-four percent of respondents now thought Dukakis was more likely to raise taxes when compared to Bush, marking a seven-point negative increase on this question for the Massachusetts governor in less than three weeks and a 26-point overall gap between the two candidates (CBS News Poll).

This number subsided slightly over the next month, as evidenced by a new CBS News Poll in early September 1988, which asked the same question. In this poll, ten percent of respondents thought Bush was more likely to raise taxes, thirty percent answered Dukakis, followed by fifty-two percent responding that it made no difference and eight percent expressing no answer (CBS News Poll). This twenty-point gap between the Bush and Dukakis reinforced earlier findings which found that voter opinion substantially favored Bush over Dukakis throughout the entire general election campaign. In addition, if a correlation exists between Bush's nominating speech and public opinion as to which candidate was more likely to raises taxes, which is plausible considering that the CBS News polls were completed during the same time of Bush's convention speech, it is fair to also argue that Bush did not substantially change voter opinion on where he stood on taxes. Instead, these polls suggest that while voter opinion changed minimally as it relates to Bush's position, the effect was that voters saw Dukakis as more likely to raise

taxes, thus shaping public opinion of him in the closing days of the campaign based in large part on the issue of taxes. Expanding on this assumption also suggests that Bush's promise not to raise taxes resonated with the electorate by establishing his political credibility on the salient campaign issue of taxes. In short, the public had responded approvingly to Bush's unequivocal commitment to maintaining tax rates at existing levels.

A similar poll conducted by the Los Angeles Times throughout September and October of 1988 leading up to the election also reinforces this argument. Asking "which one (of the 1988 presidential candidates) do you think would do the best job of holding down taxes: Michael Dukakis or George Bush—or haven't you heard enough about that yet to say," the first poll in this series, conducted between September 9-11, revealed that forty-three percent said Bush, compared to twenty-six percent for Dukakis with sixty-nine percent of respondents either refusing to answer or claiming they had not heard enough. The second poll, performed between September 23-25, demonstrated that Dukakis had gone from twenty-six percent to eighteen percent of respondents saying he would most likely do the best job of holding down taxes (Los Angeles Times Poll). Contrastingly, Bush had dramatically increased his standing in this poll from forty-three percent to fifty-nine percent in less than two weeks (Los Angeles Times Poll). A September 29 poll surveying 622 registered voters revealed a slight uptick for Dukakis from eighteen percent to twenty-one percent of voters viewing him more favorably on this issue, compared to Bush cementing a fifty-three percent rating among respondents believing he would do the best job of holding taxes down (Los Angeles Times Poll). The same poll conducted between October 11-13 showed twenty-three percent of voters now

viewed Dukakis favorably on keeping taxes down while Bush maintained a commanding double-digit lead with forty-eight percent of voters continuing to express confidence in his ability to keep taxes down (Los Angeles Times Poll). The Los Angeles Times polls appear to suggest that public opinion of the tax issue experienced dramatic swings in Bush's favor. In turn, these polls indicate that Bush's relentless message of "read my lips" sunk into the political consciousness of the American public, which identified it as a definitive promise. In other words, Bush's political credibility, especially among conservative republicans, was directly tied to him not raising rates. Nevertheless, the Los Angeles Times polling data incorporated into this work reveals that Bush's repeated claims that his administration would not raise taxes had an effect on how voters assessed each candidate in terms of their policy commitments.

## **DEMOCRATIC REFLECTIONS**

Michael Dukakis reflected on Bush's campaign pledge of not raising taxes. Sitting at the kitchen table in his Brookline, Massachusetts home, Dukakis said that "he [Bush] obviously didn't mean it. I mean, during the 1980s, the U.S. government was running massive deficits with no end in sight. It was terrible" (author interview [hereinafter referred to as "Dukakis Interview"]). Asked whether he ever had any personal conversations with Bush about his "no new taxes" pledge, Dukakis indicated that he had tried to convince Bush privately that tackling the deficit needed to be a federal priority. "It was after the election and I had to go to Washington for some business as governor. Bush calls me, he's already been elected president, and he asks if I can meet him at the Vice-Presidential Residence. And so, I agree" (Dukakis Interview). Dukakis describes the meeting at the Naval Observatory, in which he expresses shock at the candid exchange

the two former opponents have over the fiscal state of the country. “I tell him, ‘you have to do something about the deficit, it’s out of control,’ and he agrees. I explain to him that we had a very successful program in Massachusetts while I was governor, a revenue enforcement program that could be a successful model for the nation. I encouraged him to consider a program like that. Bush responds that he’ll give this information to Jimmy [Baker], but that he can’t deal on taxes for the first year” (Dukakis Interview). Dukakis recalls being startled by the president-elect’s response, particularly because Bush’s promise to never raising taxes was foundational to his political message during the race. “The deficit problem was certainly in the minds of all of us at the time, especially if you were in politics. And Bush had made his whole campaign about not raising taxes. To say that a discussion had to be delayed for a year suggested to me it was not something he was serious about” (Dukakis Interview). Pressed if Bush’s pledge, which he ultimately broke, could be considered a lie, Dukakis responded by saying that “[i]f you make a political promise that is completely contradictory to your own values, don’t be surprised if you fail. That’s what happened with Bush. He made a *temporary* promise in ’88 that he couldn’t possibly keep. And he knew that” (Dukakis Interview). Governor Dukakis’ claim that Bush’s pledge was temporary provokes the question as to if “read my lips” can be considered a lie. Does making a promise that one knows they cannot keep constitute a lie? The definition outlined earlier, which interprets a lie as “knowingly making a false statement” would suggest that a temporary promise made while understanding the economic facts that undercut such a claim indicates a lie.

### **INITIAL PUBLIC SKEPTICISM**

While polling data maintains that voters believed Bush would do a better job at keeping taxes down, surveys performed before and after the election also suggests that a sizeable portion of registered voters felt Bush would not ultimately keep his pledge. This dynamic is compelling seeing that voters were more compelled to vote for Bush based on this policy position, but also suspected early on that the Republican nominee could not keep his long-repeated promise. For example, a poll taken between October 23-26 asked respondents if they believed George Bush when he said he would not permit any new taxes or if he might accept new taxes (NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll). While twenty-one percent of respondents said they believed him when he said he would not allow new taxes, seventy-one percent answered that he might accept new taxes, along with eight-percent responding that they were not sure (NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll). These numbers remained virtually unchanged in a similarly-worded poll after Bush was elected with twenty-two percent responding that they believed he would not accept new taxes, seventy-one percent answering that they did not believe he could maintain this pledge, and seven percent answering that they were not sure (NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll). However, a survey conducted three-months into Bush's presidency exposed more intensely the American public's suspicion that Bush could not keep his promise of no new taxes. That poll, conducted between April 22-25, revealed that seventy-five percent of voters believed Bush would ask for new taxes despite his pledge (NBC News/Wall Street Journal). Only nineteen percent thought he would never ask for new taxes and six percent answered that they were not sure (NBC News/Wall Street Journal).

## **REPUBLICAN REFLECTIONS**



The problem that Bush faced was a Democratic-controlled Congress that would not accept tax rates at existing levels if spending reductions, particularly in entitlement programs, were the only negotiable budgetary dimension. Hollis McLoughlin, who served as Assistant Secretary of the Treasury from 1989 to 1993, told this author that congressional Democrats had no real plan to negotiate on the budget with the White House in 1990. “The democratic congress had no interest in a negotiated settlement on the budget. They were determined for him [Bush] to break his pledge. They wanted him to raise taxes, so they could frame this as ‘Bush breaking his campaign promise’” (author interview [hereinafter referred to as “McLoughlin Interview”]). McLoughlin described the behind-the-scenes negotiations on the budget with members of Congress. “We originally had an agreement for spending cuts as well as revenue increases. Our originally plan, which was hammered out at the famous summit at Andrews Air Force Base, had deeper spending cuts than the deal we ultimately agreed to with congressional leaders” (McLoughlin Interview). This summit, which both Democrats and Republicans attended and was part of a larger effort by the White House, as McLoughlin says, “to get everyone off campus, away from staffers, and come to an agreement,” ultimately failed (McLoughlin Interview). However, the failure was just as much a result of Democratic resistance to anything short of including revenue increases as it was to congressional conservatives renegeing on the budget deal. “After we had reached this agreement, [Newt] Gingrich went back to his caucus and told them the plan, they rejected it,” McLoughlin continues, adding, “that made it more difficult as Democrats then pushed for additional revenue increases” (McLoughlin Interview).

Trent Lott, who was serving in his first term in the Senate, confirmed this account. “Newt and Vin [Weber] were hardline. I was not happy with the agreement, but we had to deal with the deficit. It was people in the House who ultimately broke this deal up” (Lott Interview). In an oral history project with presidential historian Richard Norton Smith, Senator Dole corroborates this account of the initial budget agreement that conservatives ultimately broke up. “And [Newt] Gingrich. I think they shot down the first deal, and then there was a second deal, which I’ve heard described as worse than the first deal in terms of spending controls. If there ever had been a time when you were entitled to say, “I told you so,” that would have been it” (Smith 2007).

However, Senator Lott also criticized Bush’s economic advisors for pressuring him to agree to the settlement in the first place. “I think his budget people convinced him he needed to do something about this budget. I think he thought he was being courageous in agreeing to a tax hike when his confidantes were, in reality, misleading him. I think he was misled by David Stockman\*<sup>8</sup> and Dick Darman [Office of Management and Budget Director] who were his budget people. He was pushed into a deal with George Mitchell and the Democrats” (Lott Interview). While not included in the scope of this thesis, Secretary McLoughlin also suggests that preparations for a war with Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein over his invasion of Kuwait applied additional pressure on Bush to come to an agreement as he knew unexpected defense expenditures were likely in the months ahead.

“That’s a dimension that is often lost in this debate. State department policymakers expressed their frustration with launching a war in the Middle East absent

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<sup>8</sup> \*David Stockman served as Director of the Office of Management and Budget in Ronald Reagan’s administration.

an agreement on the budget question. The only reason to address the Gulf War is to also place Bush breaking his pledge into that context to understand what he was dealing with as an American president” (McLoughlin Interview).

McLoughlin argues that developing events in the Middle East compelled the president to come to an agreement sooner rather than later. “Democratic leaders [in Congress] were determined, because of the accelerated possibility of conflict with Iraq in Kuwait, to have him agree to a budget that had less spending cuts than originally conceived and tax increases. And Bush, being the fighter pilot during World War II, shot out of the sky at 18, was not going to put troops on the ground without a negotiated settlement on the budget” (McLoughlin Interview).

### **THE BUDGET DEAL**

The legislation which ultimately marked President George H.W. Bush’s breaking of his 1988 campaign pledge was the Budget Enforcement Act of 1990.<sup>9</sup> The budget deal, which was part of the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990, created limits for discretionary spending and implemented a “pay-as-you-go” (PAYGO) model. “Pay-as-you-go” mandated that spending increases be matched with revenue increases to either produce a deficit-neutral or deficit-reducing budget over a five-year fiscal period.<sup>10</sup> Bush ultimately signed this legislation in October 1991, which included an increase in the top marginal tax rate from twenty-eight to thirty-one percent and an increase in the individual alternative minimum tax rate from 21 to 24 percent. (The Budget Enforcement Act of 1990). The bill also increased the fuel tax by 5 cents per gallon (The Tax Policy Center). On the spending side, \$324 billion over a five-year period was cut from discretionary

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<sup>9</sup> Slaying the Dragon of Debt: Fiscal Politics and Policy from the 1970s to the Present.

<sup>10</sup> “Slaying the Dragon of Debt: Fiscal Politics and Policy from the 1970s to the Present.

spending, which included cuts in Medicare and other entitlement programs (Congress and the Nation). In total, the Budget Enforcement Act of 1990 projected a deficit reduction of \$496 billion over a five-year period (Congress and the Nation).

There were compelling reasons for Bush to reach an agreement. Chief among them was reducing the deficit and the debt. Having said that, discouraging economic developments on the horizon called for action. First, the business cycle was working against him (Meacham 2015). A recession early in the Reagan presidency followed by several years of economic expansion contributed to an exploding national debt attributed to an unwillingness among lawmakers to adequately raise taxes in the 1980s (Meacham 2015). As Bush assumed office in 1989, slower economic growth meant decreased tax revenues and, in turn, a greater deficit (Meacham 2015). Widespread expectations by economists at the time suggested a looming recession in either 1990 or 1991 (Walsh 1993). Compounding this problem were the challenges imposed by the savings and loan crisis of the late 1980s, which was projected to cost the U.S. government several hundred billion dollars (Silk 1990). The crisis ultimately cost taxpayers \$125 billion (Curry and Shibut). Although President Bush initially threatened a veto of any budget deal that included an increase in taxes in early 1990, a provision within an earlier legislative piece, known as Gramm-Rudman-Hollings, authorized across-the-board spending cuts up to \$100 billion if Congress failed to produce a budget.<sup>11</sup> In short, Bush had to come to terms with this economic problem not as a candidate appealing to his party's base, but as a president who was elected to govern.

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<sup>11</sup> "Slaying the Dragon of Debt: Fiscal Politics and Policy from the 1970s to the Present.

Ultimately, several of the people spoken to for this project describe the political fallout as a result of conservative republicans failing to back the president's decision. Governor Dukakis contends that it was a conservative backlash against Bush which ultimately produced the damaging political consequences for the policy reversal. "It hurt him badly for his race for reelection," saying that "it was [Pat] Buchanan who really whacked him on it during the primary. This was a classic case of politician's not keeping their word" (Dukakis Interview). Asked how Bush's breaking of his campaign promise situates itself into a more general discussion of presidential deception, Governor Dukakis suggests that Bush's ultimate decision was deceptive. "I certainly didn't endorse his public position during the campaign, which he outlined more definitively in his convention speech. But it was classic case because, A, he raised taxes and B, because he broke his promise. And it hurt him because conservatives didn't go along with him on it" (Dukakis Interview). Trent Lott, who ultimately became Senate majority leader in 1996, expressed disappointment with President Bush's decision. "Most republicans and the leadership were not happy with this. We really felt like he broke his word. But every president has to come to terms with the reality of governing" (Lott Interview).

However, Senator Lott also suggests that the parameters used to define a lie are particularly important in the case of "read my lips." "Did he make a promise that he knew he couldn't keep at the time? That would be a lie. I don't know if he did that. I truly believe he meant it when he said it. I was there in New Orleans at the [1988 Republican] convention when he said it" (Lott Interview). Discussing the impact of Bush's decision on his presidential credibility, Secretary McLoughlin indicates that the rhetoric of "no new taxes" prevented policymakers from interpreting the president's promise more

widely. "The political imperative was that this was great rhetoric. I would contend that the pledge meant that everybody, including conservatives, could get behind no taxes. And that meant no taxes, period. But it completely jammed any discussion of revenue increases from a policy position" (McLoughlin Interview). However, Secretary McLoughlin also admits that "it had a significant impact on him in terms of his credibility" (McLoughlin Interview).

### **ELITE POLITICAL OPINION**

A content analysis of editorial pieces from major publishers sets the context for elite reaction relating to Bush's breaking of his 1988 campaign promise. Editorials from January 1990 to January 1991 from *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and *The New York Times* provides sufficient ideological cover of the political spectrum. In turn, this interpretation of elite political opinion offers a glimpse into how the fourth estate perceived the president's credibility before and after he made the decision to support a tax increase within the framework of the Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990.

### **THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**

The inclusion of *The Wall Street Journal* in this analysis serves to represent the elite political opinion of a conservative newspaper and their interpretation of the Bush saga as it relates to "read my lips." Moreover, this content analysis of *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial pieces focusing on Bush's policy reversal appears to locate frustration with the president's inability to push a capital gains tax cut through the Congress. Throughout the entire budget battle, which ultimately ends with Bush agreeing to raise taxes in exchange for spending reductions, the *Journal* demonstrates a clear and consistent policy preference for a capital gains tax cut. For example, a 5 January editorial suggests that the president's elevated popularity as a result of the successful Panama

invasion should be leveraged to submit a capital gains tax cut to the Congress (“A Panama Dividend?”). Similarly, a June 27 editorial, a few days after President Bush announces his support for a tax increase, asks the question as to how tax revenue increases are plausible without a tax increase (“Lip Reading”). The editorial promotes the idea that this raising of funds could be facilitated through a tax cut in capital gains. This type of rhetoric appears to fit the mold of prevailing economic philosophy among conservatives at the time which favored tax cuts as a way of stimulating economic growth and additional revenues. The *Journal's* focus on the issue of tax cuts for capital gains never fully dissipates. In fact, an August 9, 1990 WSJ editorial attacks the Bush administration for its over eagerness for a budget summit at the expense of destroying the possibility for a capital gains cut, which the paper argues would stimulate the economy and ultimately begin to address the deficit problem (“The Summit Recession”).

While a great deal of attention is devoted to promoting the *Journal's* fiscal position on capital gains during this time frame, a few editorials concentrate on the political consequences of Bush's decision to raise taxes. A June 28 editorial by the *Journal* concedes that tax increases are ultimately necessary for federal deficit control but goes on to criticize the Democratic Party for excessive celebrating due to Bush breaking his pledge (“Lipping It Up”). The editorial piece suggests that the Democratic Party exists only to raise taxes. A few days later, on July 2, the *Journal* runs an editorial with the title “Mr. Bush's Leadership,” which attacks the president for breaking his campaign pledge (“Mr. Bush's Leadership”). The paper argues that the political consequences of Bush's reversal are a “disillusioned” electorate that needs evidence that taxation will produce economic benefits for the fiscal maintenance of the country (“Mr. Bush's

Leadership”). On July 3, an editorial describes the budget negotiations between the president and congressional leadership while also calling attention to demonstrations in Trenton, New Jersey against the tax increase proposals (“Read Our Lips”). However, a week later, the *Journal* returns to opining on the market consequences of the proposed tax increase. A July 10 editorial describes the implications of a stock-transfer tax, which seems to heighten speculation as to what type of tax Bush is considering (“A Lead Balloon”). This editorial concludes that uncertainty and a general lack of confidence in the president’s leadership is leading to less efficiency in the marketplace and, in turn, decreased revenue as a result of fewer stock market trades (“A Lead Balloon”). After this point, *The Wall Street Journal’s* editorials as it relates to President Bush’s decision become increasingly critical. For example, an editorial published on August 2 equates Bush’s marketing campaign for revenues increases with that of Coca-Cola’s introduction of the “new” coke, a marketing strategy which ultimately turned out to be a disaster (“Coca-Cola Classic”).

Over the next couple of months, *The Wall Street Journal* does not publish any editorials which explicitly examine the president’s decision to break his campaign pledge. Instead, the paper outlines what it refers to as a pro-growth plan ahead of the president’s 1991 State of the Union Address on 13 December (“A Pro-Growth Program”). This is in keeping with the *Journal’s* insistence that a capital gains cut would boost economic growth and begin to chip away at the deficit. In summary, to the extent that *The Wall Street Journal* challenges President Bush’s credibility during this time, it is located in the conservative paper’s frustration with his unwillingness or inability to push a capital gains cut and a general disinterest in representing the business communities interest in the tax



debate. Having said that, elite opinion from this source does seem to be significantly shaped by the lie, but rather reveals a general ideological distaste for the specifics of the policy change itself.

### **THE WASHINGTON POST**

It is clear that *The Washington Post* was more critical in terms of Bush's presidential leadership both before and after he breaks his campaign pledge. In several editorials, the paper situates Bush's reluctance to address the deficit problem with higher tax rates into the broader context of his credibility as a responsible steward of the country's fiscal future. For example, a January 21 piece by the *Post* describes the president as wanting it both ways with lower tax rates and lower interest rates even in the face of continual federal deficits and slower economic growth ("Toy Store Economics"). A February 5 editorial by the *Post* challenges the notion that the president's fiscal plan of restraining tax increases is preserving personal savings ("... And Tax-Cut Folly"). In a similar vein, the next editorial appears three months later with the title "Read His Ellipses," which suggests that the president's campaign promise of no new taxes is fading as the administration comes to terms with the deficit ("Read His Ellipses").

While the *Post* is arguably more critical in tone and content compared to *The New York Times* or *The Wall Street Journal*, the paper does indicate its approval of the president's policy change in a few editorial pieces. This only further demonstrates that the paper expressed a clear policy preference for increased taxes to deal with the deficit. This is given full view in an editorial on May 11, which describes the president's efforts to reduce the national debt by accepting tax hikes as an inevitable by-product of a balanced budget agreement ("Those Budget Talks"). However, the most political

inconvenient editorial arguably arrives a couple of weeks later after Bush publicly signals his uneasy support for a tax increase (“Yes to Taxes”). This column discusses the disparity in Bush’s campaign promise of no new taxes with his presidential support for an increase in 1990. Correspondingly, one column which seems to justify the claim that *The Washington Post* treats Bush’s reversal more forgivingly is published on July 19, which blasts House Republicans for failing to fall in line with Bush’s support for a tax increase to begin addressing the fiscal health of the country (“The No-Fingerprints Party”). The column refers to House conservatives as “irresponsible” (“The No-Fingerprints Party”).

A November 12 editorial by *The Washington Post* takes a position diametrically opposed to that of *The Wall Street Journal* (“Not Capital Gains Again”). In this column, the paper critiques the president for continual effort to cut the capital gains tax (“Not Capital Gains Again”). From this point forward, *The Washington Post* begins examining specific policy proposals of the budget negotiations as more information is released. However, these editorials are often obscured with political speculations as the ’92 presidential race gets underway, which is not necessarily relevant to the scope of this work. In total, however, the elite reaction of *The Washington Post*’s editorial pieces on President Bush’s “read my lips” controversy is an extension of its fundamentally different political and moral perspective on the fiscal debate during this time.

## **THE NEW YORK TIMES**

For the purposes of this project, *The New York Times* serves as a benchmark to measure the elite opinion of a major left-leaning news source. After reviewing editorial pieces from before and after President Bush broke his campaign pledge, it is clear that while *The New York Times* was not incredibly swayed by Bush’s lie itself, the paper’s

general editorial position appears to be shaped by the eventual policy decision of raising taxes. In a similar vein, the paper's editorial team conveys that one of its primary concerns are the effects that policy inaction will have on the deficit and entitlement programs.

From January 1990 to January 1991, hundreds of editorials appear in *The New York Times* featuring President Bush's campaign promise of not raising taxes. As it is impossible to adequately describe all of these editorials, a sample has been selected to convey *The New York Times* editorial positions over the relevant period of time outlined above. The first editorial on the matter appears on January 28, 1990, which outlines Bush's budget plan in broad strokes. Noting that Bush is intending on submitting this plan to the Congress in his first joint address, the editorial discusses the impact of Bush's budget blueprint on Social Security with references as to how he can keep his promise of no new taxes, preserve Social Security entitlement spending, and deal with the deficit ("To Save Social Security, Save"). *The New York Times* follows up two days later with a much more critical editorial. This editorial examines the impact of the president's fiscal plan in the context of attempting to keep his promise at the expense of good governance. Titled "His 'Integrity Fund': Arbitrary, Unfair," the Times labels his plan a "noble-sounding proposal," but, in reality, gutting Social Security in the name of balancing the budget ("His 'Integrity Fund': Arbitrary, Unfair"). Similarly, a February 1 editorial criticizes the president for leveraging political promises to hallow out signature entitlement programs. The editorial slams the president for using the federal government as his own political "piggy bank" ("Mr. Bush's Piggy Bank").

A March 13 editorial discusses the impact of House Ways and Means Chairman Dan Rostenkowski's insistence on attacking the federal deficit through a combination of new revenue measures and spending cuts ("Fighting the deficit too bravely"). This article is interesting because while Rep. Rostenkowski and President Bush struck an agreement not to address taxes in the first year of his presidency (Meacham 2015), the public signal by the chairman of the powerful House committee suggests that lawmakers were already maneuvering to put tax increase measures on the table as part of a negotiated settlement ahead of the president's policy reversal in the ensuing months ("Fighting the deficit too bravely"). The next relevant piece appears on March 18, directly challenging the notion of reducing the deficit by eliminating entitlement and other spending programs that disproportionately benefit the nation's poor. The piece reports that while the president wants to improve education and reduce drug abuse, his fiscal priorities outlined in his 1991 budget amount to half of spending for fiscal year 1981, adjusted for inflation ("Yes: Drive Down the Deficit No: Don't Punish the Poor"). The editorial goes on to explain that while the president's rhetoric is often in keeping with his vision for a kinder, gentler nation, policy plans appear completely devoted to reducing spending programs for low-income households ("Yes: Drive Down the Deficit No: Don't Punish the Poor").

The first shift in editorial attention with respect to suspicion that President Bush might break his 1988 campaign pledge occurs on May 9, 1990. The editorial, titled "Yes, Cut the Deficit. Then What?" analyzes Bush's willingness to discuss tax increase measures as part of a budget package ("Yes, Cut the Deficit. Then What?"). This is the first piece in which *The New York Times* covers President Bush's budget plans in a favorable light as it relates to the deficit problem. Urged by Bush's recent steps, the

Times refers to his openness as “encouraging” (“Yes, Cut the Deficit. Then What?”). Three weeks later, the *Times* follows up with an editorial presenting polling information that confirms voter awareness that taxes will likely increase (“New Taxes without Fear”). In addition, this editorial describes politicians as not wanting to admit that taxes are going up until after midterm elections despite widespread agreement that no alternative has been presented to assert control over the deficit (“New Taxes without Fear”). A month later, the *Times* runs an editorial announcing that the “momentous” decision by President Bush to grudgingly raise taxes has arrived (“The deficit, without pretense”). Interpreting the president’s decision as him disavowing the ‘88 pledge for the purpose of freeing congressional action, the *Times* frames the president’s decision as him getting “serious” with the budget negotiations and accepting tax increases as an inevitable dimension for a settlement (“The deficit, without pretense”).

Roughly one month later, featuring the ominous headline, “Congress: One Month Left,” *The New York Times* points out that congressional inaction on advancing a deficit reducing budget is for the sole purpose of maintaining campaign contributions and dodging difficult votes ahead of the August recess (“Congress: One Month Left”). Congress, the paper directs, needs to get back to the nation’s business regardless of how politically uncomfortable it can be at times. On October 5, following tense budget negotiations between congressional leaders and the White House as well as a procedural House vote against the budget compromise a day earlier, the editorial warns that political challenges may ultimately overwhelm any constructive compromise on deficit reduction (“Rewriting the budget's wrongs”). The editorial challenges the durability of the fragile budget settlement (“Rewriting the budget's wrongs”). However, this caution is ultimately

proven wrong with the October 26 editorial praising the final outline of the negotiated budget settlement, which the paper notes is “credible and fair” in reducing the deficit over the next five years (“Warts and all, a budget victory”). In a similar vein, the editorial praises the president for his stewardship of the agreement through politically tense moments (“Warts and all, a budget victory”). Yet, this support proves temporary with an editorial two weeks later on November 9 describing a failing economy and “restlessness” within the Republican Party as political challenges he must overcome for future political victories (“The Halfway President”). For the purposes of this study, this is the last relevant editorial piece in the time period specified above. In the final analysis, while *The New York Times* is never a champion of President Bush’s political or policy objectives, the paper grudgingly endorses the general framework of the policy decision which raised tax rates in the *Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990*. This is evidenced by editorial pieces before Bush’s reversal, which advocated for the increase as well as editorials after the president resolved his policy commitment with a tax hike.

### **BUSH’S CREDIBILITY**

As stated earlier, a presidential lie can be defined as making a knowingly false statement with an explicit intention of deceiving or with previous information that contradicts expressed statements (Alterman 2005). However, a nuanced view of presidential credibility is critical in capturing the essence of presidential mistruths. In the case of George H.W. Bush, the promise not to raise taxes was borne out of a political necessity. Several have argued that in order to win the nomination and, subsequently, the general election, Bush had to consolidate conservative support (Meacham 2015). Yet, once Bush became president, the overwhelming responsibility to enact good policy gave

way to political promises made in the heat of a campaign (Meacham 2015). As slowing economic growth and congressional resistance to reach a settlement without revenue increases applied additional pressure to address the country's fiscal challenges, the president was forced to violate his 1988 campaign promise. Yet, by doing exactly what Bush had said he would oppose, the president had shattered his credibility among conservatives (Dukakis Interview).

Presidential credibility is at the heart of this important question involving political deception. If we are to agree that President Bush lied when he stated he would oppose any new tax increases despite information and insight he possessed which would have made such a promise politically irresponsible, how was his credibility effected? The way in which one defines credibility is important when examining George Bush's pledge and his ultimate breach of it. Is credibility purely an exercise in maintaining pre-defined political promises even if it has the capacity to harm the nation? Or is political credibility the choice of re-envisioning policy priorities in light of new and emerging information? Neither description of credibility fully takes into account the multi-dimensional responsibilities an American president is faced with which complicates an already challenging decision-making process.

In the case of "read my lips," Bush made a political promise that economic realities prevented him from maintaining over the course of his term. Yet, insofar as Bush deceived the country, the policy flip was justified as a moral imperative not to continue on a course of economic self-harm and saddle future generations with enormous debt obligations. Several elite observers interviewed for this project acknowledge that Bush's decision created discontent within the Republican Party which ultimately weakened Bush

politically (Dukakis 2017; Lott 2017; Stephanopoulos 2017). In the 1992 presidential primary, George Bush is challenged by Pat Buchanan. A conservative figure in the Republican Party dating back to the presidency of Richard Nixon, Buchanan relentlessly hits Bush for what he contends is the president breaking his promise (Richert 2012). To the extent that it hurt him in the 1992 presidential primary is important in understanding the level of discontent among conservatives within the party and, in turn, how Bush's credibility was compromised in the eyes of Republican voters (Richert 2012). As Senator Lott recalls, "that was a beginning of a divide," referring to the conservative insurgency on Bush's right (Lott Interview). The primary challenge is a direct political consequence for what many consider an example of Bush's insufficient conservatism.

A key architect of Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign against Bush, George Stephanopoulos describes the damage to Bush's political credibility as cumulative. "It hurt him in both the primary and general," says the former Clinton aide-de-camp (author interview hereinafter referred to as "Stephanopoulos Interview"). However, Stephanopoulos would not characterize Bush's decision as a lie. "I wouldn't call it a lie. It was an irresponsible promise, for sure. But I just don't think it was a lie. Because it was in his control. He didn't have to go along with it" (Stephanopoulos Interview). Having said that, Stephanopoulos contends that Bush's credibility as a political leader was damaged. "It was certainly a credibility question. The most effective advertisement we ever aired against Bush were his words 'read my lips' with his face because at that point it was the most famous broken promise in the history of American politics" (Stephanopoulos Interview). Yet, Stephanopoulos argues that Bush made the right decision by raising taxes. "It was the right thing to do. It was a responsible decision"



(Stephanopoulos Interview). While it may have been the right decision to address the fiscal misfortune of the country, the political consequence for Bush was the emergence of a more conservative candidate.

Stephanopoulos adds that “the economy was the biggest issue. We wanted the economy to be the heart of the campaign” (Stephanopoulos Interview). Stephanopoulos, who was one of the closest aides to Clinton during the campaign and would later become White House Communications Director in Clinton’s administration, also imagines Bush running a more effective campaign for re-election had he been more willing to discuss the benefits of the budget compromise in his race for re-election. “I think he could have owned up to it during the campaign and made a case that it was a good decision for the country” (Stephanopoulos Interview). This notion of greater transparency ties directly into questions of Bush’s credibility. As Stephanopoulos argues, the political consequences for Bush were only magnified by his refusal not to speak about it as a benefit for the country, as a whole (Stephanopoulos Interview).

Richard M. Pious’ discussion on presidential legitimacy and the role that executive decisions have on the president’s ability to avoid common presidential failures are relevant in the case of President Bush (Pious 2008). Having been defeated approximately a year after commanding an international coalition to drive Iraq out of Kuwait, Bush went from having the highest domestic approval rating of an American president to an embattled incumbent fighting for his political life. Several prominent observers on this topic have argued that Bush had simply lost legitimacy as the steward of the economy in a time where the United States was in the throes of a deep recession (Dukakis 2017). The decision to raise taxes, even if it was good policy, antagonized a

financially vulnerable electorate that already felt the president was out of touch on economic issues. In the final analysis, Bush's unwavering promise to oppose new taxes was a grave political miscalculation that made it impossible to avoid future failures which would ultimately surface with a responsible plan to address the deficit. During the late 1980s and early '90s, the country needed an aggressive plan which reduced spending and increased revenues to even begin addressing the systemic problems of the U.S. deficit (Congress and the Nation). However, by framing budgetary concerns as a matter of character during the 1988 campaign and then violating a foundational pillar of his political message, Bush's decision unraveled coalitional support among conservatives that was always conditional on the perception that Bush sustain core conservative goals. In this sense, the ultimate political consequence of "read my lips" was not so much a deception of the country at large as it was the political base which had supported Bush's candidacy in 1988.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *2011 Libyan Intervention*

#### INTRODUCTION

On March 28, 2011, in a highly anticipated speech at the National Defense University, President Obama justified American military participation in the Libyan intervention. “Ten days ago, having tried to end the violence without using force, the international community offered Gaddafi a final chance to stop his campaign... his forces continued their advance, bearing down on the city of Benghazi, home to nearly 700,000 men, women and children who sought their freedom from fear” (Obama 2011). The president continued, adding that “[i]t was not in our national interest to let that happen. I refused to let that happen. And so, nine days ago, after consulting the bipartisan leadership of Congress, I authorized military action to stop the killing and enforce U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973” (Obama 2011). While asserting that the world would be better without Gaddafi in power, the president balanced this claim by conceding that “broadening our military mission to include regime change would be a mistake” (Obama 2011). By ruling out an American military plan for regime change in Libya, the president was restricting the interpretation of the U.N. mandate to effectively include only the protection of civilian populations in Libya. Having said that, decisions made by U.S. officials and subsequent military actions taken by American and coalition forces provide evidence which suggests that regime change was a dimension of U.S. policy in the Libyan crisis.

Despite the President’s nuanced language at the National Defense University relating to core U.S. objectives in Libya, Obama was not entirely forthcoming in

describing the American participation in the 2011 intervention. Presidents can never entirely level with the American people. As Richard Nixon said in his post-presidency years, there is an “importance and necessity of secrecy in the performance of the presidential role” (Wilson 2015, 59). As current scholarship demonstrates, presidential policies of a covert nature constitute a credibility problem if such policies attract sufficient public attention to the point that a president’s believability is doubted (Alterman 2005; Cannon 2008; Pfiffner 2008; Wilson 2015). In the case of President Obama’s 2011 military intervention in Libya, the president appeared to break with his long-standing commitment of extracting the United States from foreign conflicts. However, after eight weeks of political upheaval in the Middle East in March 2011, Obama was arguing for military action in Libya under the pretext of protecting civilians, but arguably falling into a plan of forcing regime change in Libya (Weissman 2016). As academics assert, a president’s credibility in military affairs is arguably the most consequential as it carries significant political and policy implications for the American people (Alterman 2005; Pfiffner 2008). While military action in Libya was seen by many in the American security community as necessary to preserve core U.S. national interests, the idea that the Obama administration viewed the NATO air campaign as a relatively inexpensive way of removing Muammar Gaddafi produces a credibility question as to the true aims of the Libyan intervention (Payandeh 2012). As reports indicate, President Obama’s willingness to intervene in the Libya crisis broke with a worldview which located a host of American foreign policy failures with a propensity for military intervention (Goldberg 2016; Tierney 2016). This chapter examines the Obama

administration policy towards Libya and to what extent U.S. participation in the intervention was motivated by a desire for regime change.

When evaluating if the unstated objective in the 2011 Libyan crisis was regime change, several questions emerge which directly address the matter of presidential credibility in matters of foreign policy. First, did the stated American policy of protecting civilians evolve into a mission of forcing regime change? Did the Obama administration mislead the American public as it relates to its true motivations for U.S. involvement in the Libyan intervention? Was the administration truthfully conveying to the American people the military developments on the ground in Libya? Finally, what were the domestic political consequences for U.S. participation in the Libyan military intervention? Since the Libyan intervention occurred less than seven years ago and the post-Gaddafi political landscape is still developing, an historic perspective on the Libyan case is rather limited. In addition, sensitive and critical documents related to U.S. intelligence and military operations remain largely classified and out of range from public scrutiny. This chapter is largely supported by books on the intervention, news articles during and after the intervention, as well as interviews with U.S. military and intelligence personnel involved in the Libyan operation.

## **ARAB SPRING BACKGROUND**

Beginning in late December 2010, protests calling for the ouster of authoritarian regimes were sweeping the Middle East and North Africa (Sadiki 2012). In Tunisia, scattered demonstrations formed in the streets in December 2010 had grown in size and intensity, ultimately creating the conditions for the long time Tunisian ruler, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, to step down in January (Chivvis 2013). A few weeks later, in February

2011, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak was similarly challenged by internal unrest. A longstanding ally strategically located along a major commercial shipping lane where a sizeable portion of western oil exports are transported, Egypt had been a regional military partner of the United States' for decades (Chivvis 2013). Even though Mubarak had been an authoritarian ally for years, U.S. officials found it difficult to resist the democratic rhetoric of the protesters in Cairo rebelling against the long-time regime. By the middle of February 2011, Mubarak resigned (Landler 2016). In late February 2011, the international spotlight turned to Libya, which appeared to be on the brink of a civil war with a substantial anti-regime bloc forming against longtime ruler Muammar Gaddafi.

Over the course of January and February 2011, sustained protests in Cairo, Tunis, Amman, and other cities in the Middle East and North Africa appeared to signal some broader pan-Arab movement challenging established regimes (Chivvis 2013). The assumption of democratic language behind the protests tested the United States' long-time support for authoritarian governments historically sympathetic to U.S. interests in the region. As anti-establishment uprisings continued throughout the Middle East and allied regimes began breaking under pressure from continued upheaval, the United States' position was further complicated by adversarial rulers in the region threatening a violent crackdown upon citizens rebelling against the repressive nature of their governments (Landler 2016). This was the case with Libya. Furthermore, allied countries such as France and Great Britain, sharing concerns of impending attacks on civilian populations within Libya by pro-government militias in late February 2011, pressed for more action in Libya on the part of western powers (Chivvis 2013; Landler 2016).

In the general climate of regime change, the Obama administration's decision that the friendly government of Hosni Mubarak had to leave created an opening for removing openly hostile authoritarian regimes across the region. In Libya, tribal unrest and anti-authoritarian sentiment revolting against Gaddafi's regime was growing (Goldberg 2016). Rebel groups, referred to as *thuwwar*, had evolved from protecting their homes to organizing militia units to defend entire communities, primarily in the eastern cities of Misrata, Ajdabiya, and Benghazi (Chivvis 2013). As Vijay Prashad described it, "[w]orking-class protests in the industrial suburbs of Tripoli conjoined with political Islamist unrest in the eastern part of the country. These were rumbles from below. They were harnessed by human rights lawyers from Benghazi and by neoliberal 'reformers' who were able to set the pace of the Libyan revolt" (Prashad 6, 2012). These groups were numerous and splintered between pro-Islamist factions attracted to the Libyan opposition, regime-backed militias, and jihadist groups dedicated to spreading Islamic extremism as Libyan civil society deteriorated (BBC 2016). Yet, during a period in 2011 where global aspirations for a democratic political transformation in the Middle East and the Arab Maghreb seemed possible, foreign powers were further compelled to intervene.

As a new wave of protests against the repressive Libyan regime provoked Gaddafi to threaten mass slaughter on the coastal city of Benghazi, the U.S. administration seized the fig leaf of protecting civilian populations (Chivvis 2013). As several scholars have argued, removing Gaddafi, an historic thorn in the side of U.S. policymakers, was shaped in large part by a desire for regime change. Gaddafi had been a hostile actor to American interests in the region. Examples included a state-sponsored attack in West Berlin in 1986 which killed a U.S. serviceman as well as confrontations with U.S. naval assets over

territorial disputes in the Mediterranean (Landler 2016). In addition, the perception that the Libyan regime was already collapsing in early March 2011 further clarified that the United States had an interest in removing Gaddafi and participate in shaping the political dynamic during a post-regime period (Chivvis 2013). In the context of the Arab spring, fragile democratic movements in Middle Eastern and North Africa were at stake if a brutal suppression of protests by the Gaddafi regime was allowed to take place (Dalacoura 2012). Likewise, a high number of civilian casualties in the eastern port cities of Libya by pro-regime militias were likely if rebel groups were not sufficiently supported with air and sea power (Morris 2013). Yet, evidence remains which suggests that U.S. and coalition forces took action beyond protecting civilian populations and, perhaps, fell into a regime change operation in Libya (Chivvis 2013).

#### **UNITED NATIONS RESOLUTION/NATO INVOLVEMENT**

The main international justification for a collective military response in Libya was borne out of United Nations Security Council Resolutions 1970 and 1973. Resolution 1970 authorized member-states to enforce an arms embargo to prevent weapons and artillery from entering Libya.<sup>12</sup> Resolution 1973 established a no-fly zone over Libya. U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973 was used as the broad legal justification for the introduction of NATO forces into Libya for the purpose of enforcing the no-fly zone.<sup>13</sup> The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1970 condemned attacks by Gaddafi's government on protesters and referred the government to the International

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<sup>12</sup> "Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1970 (March 17, 2011). Concerning Libya." Resolution 1970. United Nations Security Council. United Nations. [Hereinafter referred to as United Nations Security Council Resolution 1970.]

<sup>13</sup> Security Council Committee Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (March 17, 2011). Concerning Libya." Resolution 1970. United Nations Security Council. United Nations. United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973. [Hereinafter referred to as United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973.]



Criminal Court (the first time a country was ever referred to the ICC).<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Resolution 1970 imposed a travel ban and froze assets linked to Gaddafi and other key regime actors.<sup>15</sup> Three weeks later, on March 17, 2011, United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 was adopted and supported by ten permanent and non-permanent countries of the U.N. Security Council. Support from permanent members included France, Great Britain, and the United States as well as non-permanent member support from Lebanon, Nigeria, Portugal, and South Africa. Moreover, while Germany's abstention produced frustration among western countries, the official abstention of China and Russia was perceived as a signal to move forward with NATO under the auspices of the U.N. framework (Ferdinand 2013). Resolution 1973 authorized the international community to establish and enforce a no-fly zone and to use "all means necessary" to protect civilian populations in Libya. The measure reinforced an existing arms embargo in Libya.<sup>16</sup> Taken together, these resolutions offered the necessary political and international basis for a military intervention, which would ultimately come in the form of a U.S.-led strike on Libyan defense systems (Operation Odyssey Dawn) and a subsequent NATO enforced no-fly zone (Operation Unified Protector).<sup>17</sup>

An assessment of the degree to which President Obama's credibility was damaged in the Libyan crisis can be judged by how the United States enforced international mandates it helped create. Resolutions 1970 and 1973 provided the broad legal justifications for an international military and nonmilitary response to the Libyan crisis, respectively. However, evidence remains which demonstrates that, at times, coalition

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<sup>14</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 1970.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973.

<sup>17</sup> November 9, 2015. "NATO and Libya (Archived)." North Atlantic Treaty Organization Website. Operation Unified Protector.

forces actively disregarded provisions within Resolution 1970 to the benefit of rebel and opposition groups in Libya (Chivvis 2013; Landler 2016; Payandeh 2012; Zenko 2016). In theory, UNSC Resolutions 1970 and 1973 suggested that the international community remained a neutral actor in the Libyan conflict with the main focus directed towards protecting civilians. The intent behind the arms embargo was to de-escalate conflict within Libya in order to better protect civilian populations. However, as reports indicate, Egypt and Qatar were shipping offensive weapons to Libyan rebels (Zenko 2016). This was in coordination with U.S. military and intelligence forces, who were providing logistical support as well as air cover for *thuwwar* forces (Chivvis 2013). Yet, Resolution 1970 prohibited arms transfers to both rebel and pro-regime forces in the Libyan war.<sup>18</sup> In fact, NATO officials claimed to be enforcing the arms embargo. Despite these guidelines, operational footage published by NATO records the *HMCS Charlottetown*, a Canadian frigate patrolling Libyan ports for possible arms shipments, allowing a rebel vessel to pass into NATO-patrolled zones of Libyan ports after discovering arms, munitions, and explosives, which were prohibited under Section 9 of UNSC Resolution 1970 (Chivvis 2013; Pugliese 2012). This is to say that NATO was not only failing to enforce an arms embargo outlined by Resolution 1970, but actively disregarding it to the point of aiding rebel forces in the fight against Gaddafi's regime. In light of these facts, it is difficult to suggest the United States, which ultimately performed the bulk of intelligence and logistical work in support of the NATO operation, was not aware of these weapon movements.

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<sup>18</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 1970.

The support of the United States in the NATO enforcement of the no-fly zone and the prosecution of the arms embargo, coupled with the United States' unparalleled burden for the performance of battlefield intelligence and logistical support to the benefit of rebels, reveals a lack of neutrality on the part of the U.S. in the Libyan conflict. Arguably, actions taken by American and coalition forces during major operations in Libya demonstrates indirect support of *thuwwar* forces in their struggle to topple Gaddafi. As experts have asserted, the loose interpretation of the U.N. mandate in the form of UNSC Resolutions 1970 and 1973 failed to restrict the western coalition (primarily Great Britain, France, and the United States) from supporting the Libyan rebels (Chivvis 2013; Pugliese 2012 Zenko 2016). In this sense, it is difficult to imagine that the United States' policy aim did not ultimately include regime change if it was providing weapons and munitions to opposition groups. The fact that Resolution 1970 was voted out of the Security Council with the support of the parties involved in the *HMCS Charlottetown* incident creates the impression that the U.N. mandate was more about blunting concerns among reluctant BRIC<sup>19</sup> countries of an expansive military operation while a genuine case of mission creep set in under the humanitarian banner of the United Nations.

### **THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION DEBATE**

Presidential credibility can be judged by the reality of how decisions are made and the political context in which they are perceived by the public. In this sense, a challenge for Obama was the fact that different parts of the government were advocating for different strategies in Libya (Kamola 2018; Landler 2016). As some experts assert,

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<sup>19</sup> Brazil, Russia, India, China (BRIC).

contemporary political debates frame Libya as an “intra-administration” struggle between interventionists and foreign policy advisors reluctant to fight a third Middle Eastern war in less than ten years.

The pro-interventionist wing included NSC aide Samantha Power, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice, and to a lesser extent Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Administration officials who were reluctant to enter the fight included Defense Secretary Robert Gates, National Security Advisor Tom Donilon, and foreign policy hand Denis McDonough. These two camps were advising President Obama in his difficult decision over Libya. For the liberal interventionists, they presented Rwanda as the counterfactual for justifying an intervening in Libya (Kamola 2018). As Isaac Kamola describes, “[d]uring 2013, the legacy of the genocide in Rwanda was similarly a refrain in conversations about intervention in the Libyan civil war” (Kamola 76, 2018). The 1994 genocide in Rwanda, which the Clinton administration stubbornly refused to enter, resulted in the death of over 500,000 people in only a few months. Samantha Power, who wrote *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*, a Pulitzer Prize-winning work on the Rwandan genocide, believed inaction in Libya could produce a similar result if the west refused to act as it had in 1994. In the aftermath of Rwanda, Susan Rice, who directed the African Bureau of the National Security Council at the time of the 1994 genocide, later claimed she would do everything in her power prevent another mass slaughter of civilians as witnessed in Rwanda (Chivvis 2013). For the anti-interventionists in the White House, a concern that the U.S. military was presently overextended, coupled an already obscure objective in Libya, produced resistance to any military plan in the Pentagon (Landler; Chivvis 2013; Gates 2014).

Other scholars and experts argue that the concern to preserve western economic interests in the region was the driving force for an intervention in Libya (Landler 2016; Prashad 2012; Zenko 2016). A key U.S. intelligence aide with access to these discussions, who requested anonymity to speak candidly about internal deliberations over Libya, highlighted the economic considerations under examination by the administration. “Remember, Libya is a member of OPEC [Organization for Petroleum Exporting Countries]. There was credible evidence coming into us at the [Department of Defense] that suggested Gaddafi was going to become more erratic and unpredictable” with Libyan oil exports and the impact on the global energy market (Author Interview 2018). Indeed, the Brent crude mark, a barometer which serves as a price reference in the oil market, had increased roughly fifteen dollars per barrel from the time the Libyan crisis began until the U.S. intervention commenced on March 19, 2011.

As the prospects of a civil war engulfing Libya became more realistic, the impact of dramatically reduced crude production was challenging global energy markets, which were already under pressure by reduced exports.<sup>20</sup> Pressed if U.S. officials were concerned that Gaddafi would sabotage oil fields and refineries as a pre-emptive measure designed to evade a U.S. response to the chaos in Libya, the intelligence analyst responded that while he could not confirm these sensitive details, the sentiment of the question was fair (Author Interview 2018). The analyst continued, adding that “the United States has clear security interests in the region. As the Arab world was being rocked with the instability of the protests, we could not afford to have Gaddafi leveraging the global energy security of the world” (Author Interview 2018). On the other hand, the

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<sup>20</sup> “Country Analysis Brief: Libya.” U.S. Energy Information Administration 2018.

source spoke of security concerns inside Libya, which put U.S. personnel at risk. “There were incidents, not reported in the media, where pro-regime forces engaged U.S. assets on the ground. I wouldn’t say it was the motivator for our response, but we had a concern and presented it in our assessment” (Author Interview 2018).

### **COVERT POLICIES & PRESIDENTIAL CREDIBILITY**

The standard of judgment as to whether President Obama’s Libya policy was damaging to his credibility requires the determination if full disclosure is necessary on sensitive military matters. Several academics have argued that there are several ways in which presidents can avoid telling the public the truth (Cannon 2007; Pfiffner 2008; Thompson 2010; Wilson 2015). Pfiffner’s argument suggests a distinction between covert actions and covert policies. Covert actions are often secret in order to protect individuals, which are intended to support legitimate foreign policy goals justified under the U.S. Constitution (Pfiffner 2008). However, covert policies include examples where the president says the government is forwarding policy X when in reality it is pursuing policy Y (Pfiffner 2008). Libya did not require a significant American investment of troops or resources (Goldberg 2016). Nevertheless, it was an intervention supported in large part by the United States and which put a number of American service members in an active conflict zone (Chivvis 2013; Landler 2016; Goldberg 2016; Zenko 2016). Ultimately, if the main reason behind the administration’s decision to intervene in Libya was regime change, which it did not disclose to the American public, then such action would constitute a covert policy.

President Obama entered office as someone critical of foreign adventurism. Yet, as the Arab Spring emerged as potentially destabilizing to American security interests,

the administration found itself slipping into an interventionist role that it had previously regarded as irresponsible and reckless. In the flux of events, President Obama followed a policy course that he had previously opposed in Iraq. The perception that Obama was pursuing a policy in Libya inconsistent with his previous rhetoric situates Libya as perhaps an example where the president was dragged into a conflict by advisers and foreign allies. For Obama, the challenge in its approach was how to put together and maintain complex partnerships among nations that had few shared objectives (Chivvis 2013; Landler 2016). For the most part, the European aim was to get the United States to perform a great deal of the logistical and intelligence work associated with a technically complex military mission. As experts have noted, the French ambition for a role in the Libyan intervention was also about reasserting its national military prestige on the global stage (Chivvis 2013; Author Interview 2018). In the case of Great Britain, foreign policy analysts have suggested that David Cameron saw Libya as an opportunity to shore up his domestic political base with a humanitarian operation borne out of a traditional Responsibility to Protect (R2P) appeal in which Great Britain would play an outsized role.

Contemporary academic discussions have asserted that the most significant foreign policy decision a president can make is going to war. Yet, under false or misleading information, a president compromises the ability of the public to make an informed decision on a fundamental policy concern. This directly impacts a president's credibility. Fisher argues that presidential misrepresentations of policy seems almost routine in justifying American entrance and prolonged engagement in foreign conflicts (Fisher 2010). However, Fisher also finds that misleading the American public about the

reason for entering a military operation can result a president's credibility being hampered. The thrust of this argument builds on Arthur Schlesinger's seminal book, *The Imperial Presidency*, which documents particular abuses of executive power as it relates to inserting U.S. Armed Forces in foreign conflicts (Schlesinger 1973). Asserting that the contemporary presidency is not limited by constitutional boundaries in war-making, the nature of presidential lying has been blurred by the excesses in justifying American foreign policy adventures with executive powers (Schlesinger 1973). While few academic works have argued that President Obama explicitly lied over the reason for intervening in Libya, the main thrust of criticism locates the inability of the U.S. administration to adequately explain that there political and military strategy forced regime change.

### **THE EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVE**

A great deal of academic and non-academic scholarship on the 2011 Libyan intervention focuses on the role that European powers played in the military operation which ultimately removed Gaddafi. As several foreign policy scholars maintain, a central reason the U.S. decided to participate in the intervention was the persuasion campaign by Great Britain and France for more direct U.S. involvement. Yet, it is worth understanding the relationship that Libya shared with major European governments preceding the Arab Spring. According to a high-level European diplomat interviewed for this project, who requested anonymity to speak candidly about the European perspective of events during the Arab Spring, Libya was practically an ally of the French government before 2011. "After 9/11, Gaddafi had become closer to the west. He had cleverly given up his ambition to possess nuclear weapons. Historically, Gaddafi's government had been a



secular regime. It rejected Islamic fundamentalism in the 2000s. And so, it was quite trendy for western governments to become closer to Libya because it was perceived as a source of stability” (Author Interview 2018). Prashad shares this opinion, writing that “Gaddafi had given his regime over to the Atlantic states as an ally in the War on Terror and as a provider of oil” (Prashad 7, 2012). Pressed to explain why the French government felt so strongly to get involved in Libya when it had shunned any sort of action in Iraq, which also carried with it designs for ousting an authoritarian government, the European diplomat stated the existence of an official and non-official version of events. “Officially, when events in Libya started, Sarkozy thought there could be a risk of genocide. Gaddafi’s statement that he was going to go house by house killing rebels and their families like rats inspired Sarkozy to get involved. This was the official public position adopted by the French government.”

According to this diplomat, who possesses a sophisticated technical understanding of Middle Eastern politics, the non-official reason for France entering the Libyan crisis is deeply connected with French political and commercial interests in Libya and the region, as a whole. “What was not publicly disclosed is that when the Arab Spring started, the French government was seen to be on the side of the conservative authoritarians in the Middle East, especially in Tunisia with [President] Ben Ali. There was no forceful repudiation of these repressive regimes by France up until Libya became such a hot button topic. This is how it was perceived in Europe” (Author Interview 2018). The European source added that “as Libya came to be seen as a possible humanitarian catastrophe, France re-positioned itself on the side of the people’s revolt against Gaddafi. It was pretty clever” (Author Interview 2018). These assertions are supported both by

official government parliamentary and exhaustive news reports, which challenge Franco-British military action in Libya (Wintour and Elgot 2016). As Michael Elliot wrote in 2011, “Sarkozy started off on the wrong side of the Arab Spring, his government staying cozily entwined with that of Tunisia when the street had turned against it” (Elliot 2011). In March 2018, former President Sarkozy was placed under a formal investigation as to whether he illegally received millions of euros in campaign funding from Gaddafi and the late dictator’s regime (Chrisafis 2018).

As for the commercial interests, the source claims France was actively cultivating a relationship with Gaddafi to gain access to oil reserves and exploration rights (Lusher 2011; Murphy and Gehmlich 2007). “Before 2011, France was trying to get closer to Libya. Sarkozy was in competition with Italy and Britain for access to the vast oil reserves in the country” (Author interview 2018). Yet, for France, this could have actually been a reason to oppose Gaddafi as the situation in Libya deteriorated and the longtime ruler’s domestic authority waned. “Italy had signed an [oil exploration] agreement with Libya. They had signed joint-exploration agreements for new oil reserves in Libya. Some European diplomats believe France was interested in taking out Gaddafi to compete with the [Italian Prime Minister] Berlusconi for these rich contracts. Thinking that Gaddafi’s days were numbered, Sarkozy saw that his support for an opposition regime could give France entree with new contracts who enjoyed French support in taking out Gaddafi” (Author Interview 2018). Nevertheless, as a British MP wrote in a committee report criticizing the response, Britain and France appeared to have “elided into regime change and then we had no proper appreciation of what was going to happen

in the event of regime change, no proper understanding of Libya, and no proper plan for the consequences” (Winter and Elgot 2016).

The European source also suggested the activist work of French intellectual Bernard Henri-Levy and his support for a strong western response had a real impression on Sarkozy. “Then Levy got involved. Levy was this sort of philosopher who was loosely involved with what was going on in Libya and had powerful connections in the French government. He’s more right wing in terms of his views on Middle East power politics, particularly Israel. But his campaign of persuasion convinced Sarkozy to act on humanitarian grounds” (Author Interview 2018). In his *New Yorker* piece on the topic, Richard Brody acknowledges the impact that Levy had in shaping Sarkozy’s thoughts and decision-making on Libya. “[T]he politicization of intellectuals—and the converse, the intellectualization of politics—has been a key feature of French life at least since the eighteenth century” (Brody 2011). Brody adds that “[i]n the run-up to France’s military engagement against Gaddafi’s regime in Libya...Lévy—who began his career, in the seventies, as a political philosopher and has been an extraordinarily prominent media figure—played a vigorous role in rallying the French government, and perhaps even our own, to the cause of military intervention on behalf of the Libyan uprising” (Brody 2011). The diplomat suggested this advocacy was in the vein of trying to avoid another massive human catastrophe while the west remained paralyzed on the sidelines. “The theory was that the West could not stand by and watch another Rwanda unfold” (Author Interview 2018).

In terms of western European countries attempting to convince the United States to enter the effort in Libya, several claim this was not the case initially. According to the

European official, who spoke regularly with French government insiders intimately involved in the Libya matter, France “always understood that Obama was committed to distancing himself from the neo-conservative policies of the past decade. And, for the most part, Europe embraced his reluctance” (Author Interview 2018). This also served French and British interests whose governments were seeking to reassert their military prowess on the world stage (Watt and Norton-Taylor 2011; Wintour and Elgot 2016). “France and Great Britain wanted to demonstrate that they could intervene without the support of America. But this was preposterous” (author interview). According to published reports in 2011, perhaps delusions of grandeur played a role in European powers’ desire to intervene. “There will be those who argue that France and Britain are behaving the way they are simply because they think their history entitles them to, because they want to show that they are still great powers” (Elliot 2011). Interviewed for this work, the European source recalls that Great Britain and France came to understand that a complicated military intervention like Libya required access to the regionally convenient NATO bases in Sicily, which would require direct military participation by the United States. “The French bases in Corsica were too far away. So, NATO bases in Sicily had to be used. And therefore, if it was a NATO operation, the U.S. had to enter the fight on military and political ground to make it politically palatable for other western countries” (Author Interview 2018).

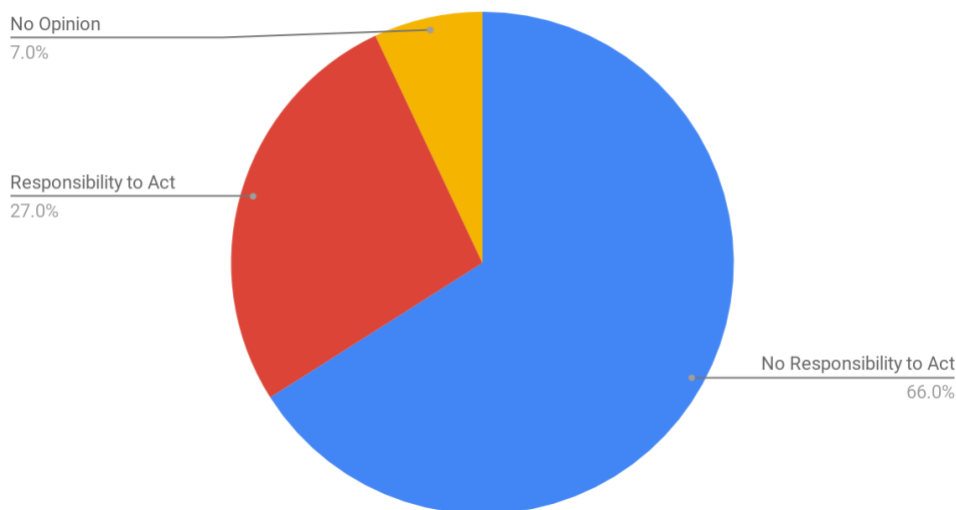
Similarly, battlefield statistics and the level of individual country participation in the 2011 Libyan intervention supports these claims (Chivvis 2013). For example, “Nine days into the [Odyssey Dawn] operation, the United States had fired 192 Tomahawks, with Britain firing only 7. The United States dropped 455 precision-guided munitions,

with 147 from the coalition. The United States also played an essential role in other key areas, flying 80 percent of all air refueling, almost 75 percent of aerial surveillance, and 100 percent of the electronic warfare missions” (Chivvis 89, 2013). These numbers broadly demonstrate that the United States ultimately performed most of the targeting, logistical, and battlefield work in Libya (Chivvis 2013).

### **MEASURING U.S. DOMESTIC OPINION**

It should be noted that public opinion polling on the U.S. intervention in Libya could not measure domestic opinion as it relates to broader questions of presidential credibility. This is because the conditions in Libya and the decisions which would ultimately produce public scrutiny over the U.S. administration’s actions were only subsequently revealed. While presidential credibility means believability on the part of American voters, the believability of the electorate in the foreign policy realm can only be adequately assessed if the public knows what actually occurred. Therefore, an historical analysis of academic and expert analysis is much more relevant than a review of public survey polls.

Pew Research Center (Figure 1)

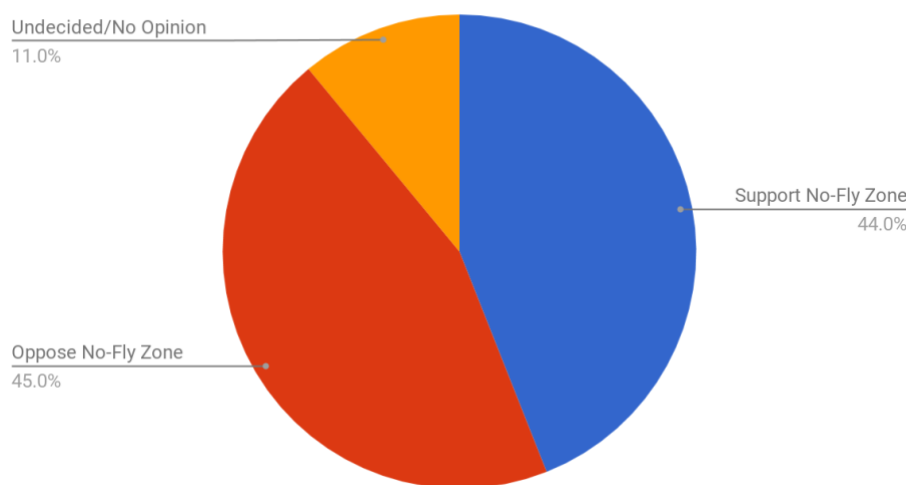


A review of U.S. public opinion polling reveals that most Americans were divided over the American intervention in Libya (Gallup 2011; Pew Research Center 2011). A Pew Research Center study captured the divided nature of U.S. domestic public opinion as it relates to the use of force in Libya. The survey, which was conducted between March 10-13, sampled 1,000 adults. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the American public overwhelmingly held the opinion that the United States did not have a responsibility to do something about the fighting between regime forces and anti-government groups in Libya. Specifically, sixty-three percent of respondents answered that the United States had no responsibility to act in Libya. Only twenty-seven percent suggested the U.S. had a responsibility to intervene.<sup>21</sup> In a similar vein, polling data revealed that Americans decisively opposed a U.S. bombing campaign against the Libyan military and its air defenses. As Figure 2 reveals, only forty-four percent favored the

<sup>21</sup> March 14, 2011. "Public Wary of Military Intervention in Libya: *Broad Concern that U.S. Military is Overcommitted.*" U.S. Politics & Policy. Pew Research Center.

United States enforcing a no-fly zone in Libya. Forty-five percent opposed the idea. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of this survey was the fact that sixty-nine percent of Americans opposed the idea of providing arms and weaponry to anti-government groups.<sup>22</sup>

Pew Research Center (Figure 2)



While the United Nations explicitly ruled out the idea of transporting arms in the Libya conflict in Security Council Resolution 1970, this provision would ultimately be violated by Egypt, Qatar, Canada, and the United States, as evidenced by the Canadian frigate incident captured in NATO footage of port patrols (Chivvis 2013). An analysis of the Pew Research Center data indicates that a substantial portion of the U.S. population recognized that America's armed forces were already burdened by over commitments. Furthermore, the fact that only fifty-percent of voters answered that the United States had

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<sup>22</sup> Public Wary of Military Intervention in Libya. Pew Research Center. March 14, 2011.

a clear goal suggested a deeper ambivalence on the part of Americans with the public rationale for the Libyan mission.<sup>23</sup>

Another Pew Research Poll released a few days later underlined the fact that most Americans saw the U.S. mission in Libya as unclear. Despite the fact that President Obama's National Defense University Speech fell within the polling time frame of this survey, an increasing percentage of Americans responded that U.S. military action lacked a coherent objective. Fifty-seven percent of respondents said the military mission lacked a clear goal, which marked a seven-percent increase from a week earlier. In a similar vein, only fifty-percent of respondents said the United States and its allies made the right decision by intervening two weeks earlier, compared to thirty-seven saying it was the wrong decision. This revelation may be better explained by previous data demonstrating that Americans felt U.S. armed forces were already overcommitted in the Middle East. Virtually unchanged was the fact that sixty-six percent of respondents opposed the United States sending arms and military supplies to the rebel groups, compared to only twenty-five percent.

The Gallup polling as it relates to American views on the U.S. intervention were slightly different from that of the Pew Research survey data. In particular, the data illustrates that Americans were much more likely to support the intervention in the beginning and that support was not situated along party lines.<sup>24</sup> However, over time, support among Republicans declines while Democratic support remains relatively consistent. The two Gallup polls on the issue, which were conducted on March 21, 2011

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<sup>23</sup> April 5, 2011. "Goal of Libyan Operation Less Clear to Public: *Top Middle East Priority: Preventing Terrorism*." U.S. Politics & Policy. Pew Research Center.

<sup>24</sup> Jones, Jeffrey M. (March 22, 2011). "Americans Approve of Military Action Against Libya, 47% to 37%." Gallup.



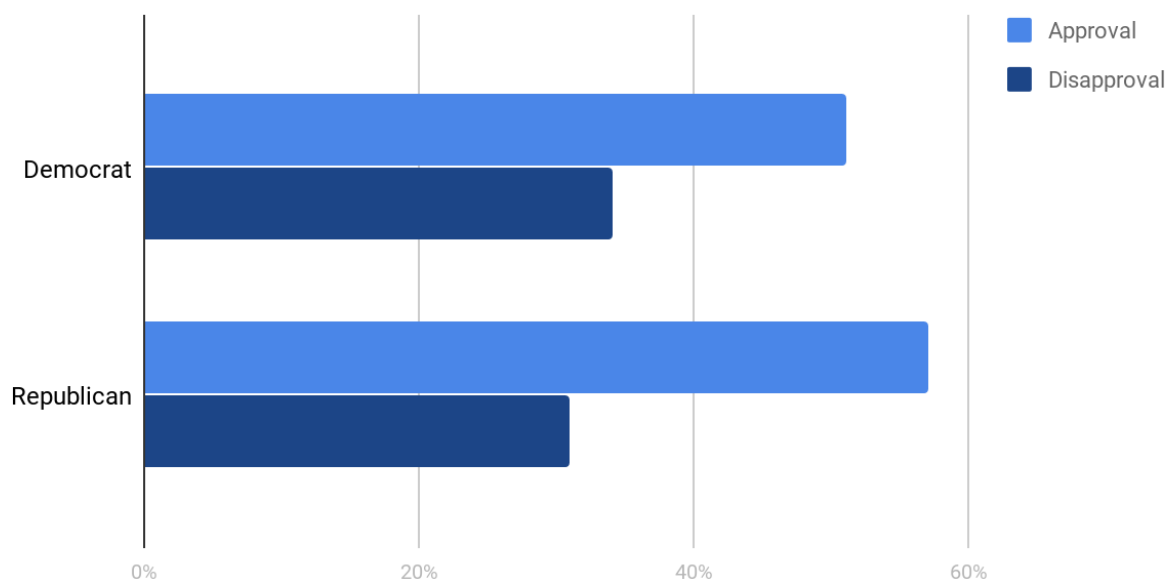
and June 22, 2011, respectively, each randomly sampled 999 adults aged eighteen and over throughout all fifty U.S. states.<sup>25</sup> The first Gallup poll, which was performed days after the U.S. publicly signed on to the NATO operation and took similar action to enforce the United Nations no-fly zone, showed that forty-seven percent of Americans approved of the action against Libya. A breakdown of the results by political party demonstrates a balanced distribution of approval and disapproval across the political spectrum. As Figure 3 illustrates, Fifty-seven percent of Republicans approved of the president's decision, while thirty-one percent disapproved. For Democrats, fifty-one percent approved, and thirty-four percent disapproved. Even if one does not accept the notion that Republicans are historically more hawkish when it comes to the use of military force, polling clearly shows that Republican have supported U.S. military interventions at substantially higher rates than Democrats in the last decade.<sup>26</sup> This may help explain why Republican respondents initially registered higher levels of support for President Obama's actions in Libya when compared to Democrats.

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<sup>25</sup> American Opinion of Military Action in Libya. Gallup. March 22, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> "War Through Partisan Lenses." Gallup. November 15, 2005.

### Approval/Disapproval for U.S. Libyan Intervention by Political Party (Figure 3)

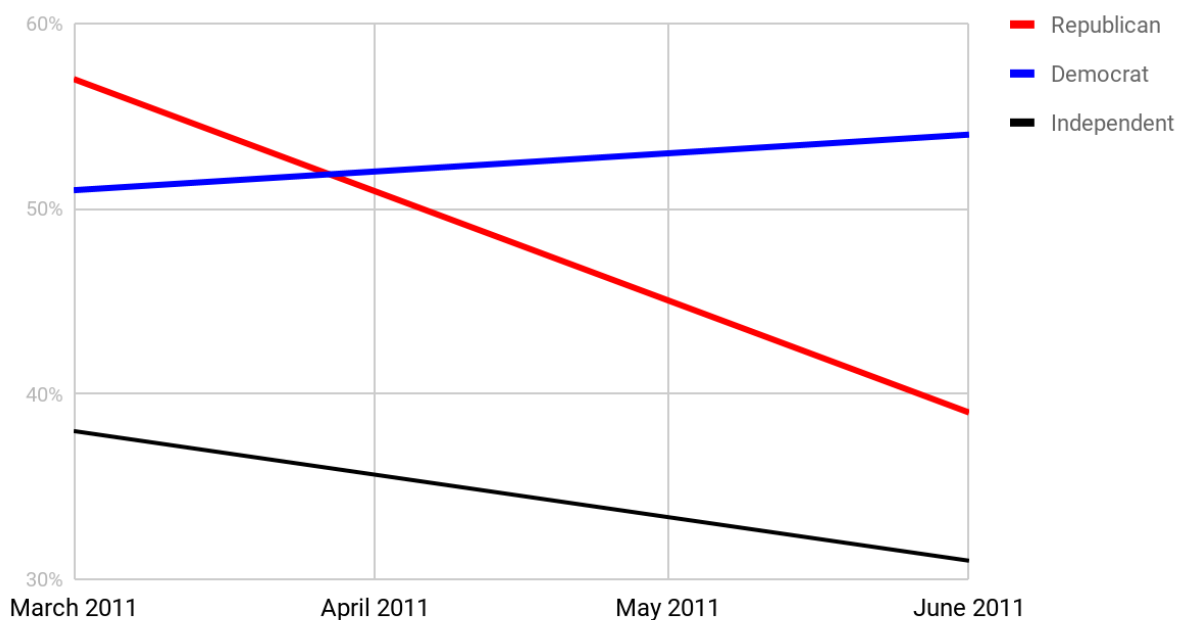


As a group, Independents most vocally registered their disapproval for U.S. action in Libya with forty-four percent disapproving and only thirty-eight percent approving. Initial analysis by Gallup suggested that Republicans had a higher rate of approval because Republicans generally support military action more frequently than Democrats. As the Gallup survey noted, however, Democratic support was higher due to subsequent surveys registering disproportionately higher support among Democratic voters for the president's agenda in total than Republicans. Interestingly, as evidenced by the initial Gallup survey in March 2011, while the stated objective of the military operation was to protect civilians in Libya from regime attacks, eighty-five percent of respondents who

approved of the U.S. mission also supported U.S. action that would ultimately end with Gaddafi's removal.<sup>27</sup>

A second poll conducted by Gallup in June 2011 suggested Republican support for the intervention had dropped substantially to only thirty-nine percent. This totaled an eighteen-percent decline in Republican approval for the U.S. intervention over the span of three months when the U.S. intervention first took place. This data is reproduced in Figure 4 above. Forty-seven percent of Republicans opposed the intervention.<sup>28</sup> The same survey showed that Democratic support had increased from fifty-one percent to fifty-four percent. Democratic disapproval only increased one-percentage point to thirty-five percent. Independent support declined to thirty-one percent. This totaled a seven-percent

Support for U.S. Intervention by Political Party (Figure 4)



drop in approval by Independent voters. A clear majority of fifty-two percent of

<sup>27</sup> American Opinion of Military Action in Libya. Gallup. March 22, 2011.

<sup>28</sup> American Opinion of Military Action in Libya. Gallup. June 24, 2011.

Independents opposed U.S. military action in Libya, which exposed an eight-percent increase in the disapproval rating among Independents. Key takeaways from the two Gallup polls seem to be that while Republican support for the U.S. intervention initially moved higher than that of self-identifying Democrats, sustained political support is located among members of the president's party. Secondly, and perhaps the clearest indication of American apathy for foreign interventionism, is that Independents constitute the largest opposition group to military support in Libya. This polled segment of the domestic population disapproved of the U.S. intervention in a decisive majority.

While this chapter addresses the question of presidential credibility relating to U.S. participation in the 2011 Libyan intervention, it also seemed appropriate to include polling data of public attitude towards the intervention in the five participating countries. A Financial Times/Harris poll also revealed that the five main participating countries in the NATO operation in Libya lacked majority domestic support for operations in Libya. The poll, which polled 6,241 adults among the five participating countries between March 30 and April 4, provided evidence of a relatively broad western resistance towards military intervention. For example, in Italy, forty-nine percent of respondents opposed military action, compared to twenty-nine percent who opposed such action. France registered the highest percentage of respondents who supported the NATO military action with forty-percent approving and thirty-one percent disapproving. Great Britain also expressed a clear division in public attitude with thirty-seven in favor and thirty-six

percent against military action. For Spain, a narrow plurality of voters was in favor of military action.<sup>29</sup>

## **ELITE PUBLIC OPINION**

An interesting dimension to the Libyan case is the fact that a substantial portion of media coverage demonstrated support for an American role in the 2011 military intervention. Throughout the entire month of March 2011, twelve editorial pieces appeared in *The New York Times* endorsing a strong position against Gaddafi's regime. For example, on March 9, an editorial titled, "Washington's Options on Libya" appeared which criticized President Obama's conflicted messaging of American policy in Libya in light of the deteriorating situation in the North African country. In the editorial, the *Times* suggested that a lack of resolve on the part of the president in terms of matching his rhetoric of supporting democratic change with military action was weakening American credibility at a pivotal moment in the Middle East.<sup>30</sup> In the editorial, the paper makes clear that the only contribution the United States can make is stopping the impending assault on Libyan civilians. In this vein, the *Times* suggests that rhetorical posturing in Washington stop and that the administration support a military campaign against Gaddafi.

Moreover, the *Times*' judgement that American credibility is weakened because of a failure to respond swiftly with military action underscores the reality that the paper was a major advocate for regime change in Libya. That editorial was followed by a piece on March 22, 2011, which refers to Gaddafi as a "thug" and "murderer" who has never

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<sup>29</sup> "Poll shows little support for Libya intervention." Financial Times.

<sup>30</sup> "Washington's Options on Libya." *The New York Times*. Editorial. The New York Times Company. New York, New York. March 9, 2011.

been held to account for his crimes. The editorial, with the caption “At War in Libya,” references United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973 and makes clear it hopes “all necessary means” are used by member nations to bring him to justice.<sup>31</sup> This bold use of language on the part of *The New York Times* is consistent with its general preference for military action in the run-up to the intervention.

Two days later, *The Times* runs another editorial, criticizing the United States for allowing France to become the leading western voice for military action in Libya. The piece critiques the administration for its inability to reassert leadership over France in Libya, especially in light of France’s recent opposition to American military action in Iraq. However, the editorial also praises French President Nicolas Sarkozy for his relentless advocacy for a United Nations-endorsed no-flight zone. The editorial claims that Sarkozy’s actions probably prevented the total destruction of Benghazi. An interesting dimension of *The New York Times* coverage of the Obama administration’s policy towards Libya as it relates to military action is its heavy criticism for failing to implement a military policy sooner.<sup>32</sup> This is evident in a March 29 editorial, which comes after President Obama’s policy speech at the National Defense University. In the editorial, titled “President Obama on Libya: Nine days after the air campaign begins, the president presents his case,” the *Times* approves of Obama’s decision to join allies in the Libyan intervention, but asserts that the president was too slow to move militarily and has yet to convey a clear long-term strategy of the U.S. mission in Libya.<sup>33</sup> What appears interesting in the *Times*’ assessment is their criticism of the president for his failure to

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<sup>31</sup> “At War In Libya.” *The New York Times*. Editorial. The New York Times Company. New York, New York. March 22, 2011.

<sup>32</sup> “Discord Among Allies.” *The New York Times*. Editorial. The New York Times Company. New York, New York. March 24, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> “President Obama on Libya: Nine days after the air campaign begins, the president presents his case.” *The New York Times*. Editorial. The New York Times Company. New York, New York. March 29, 2011.

commit sooner militarily, but also the editorial audacity of challenging the administration for its inability to clarify the broader U.S. military strategy in Libya.

*The New York Times*' persistence for increased military action is again on display in an April 8, 2011 editorial labeled "Keeping Ahead of Gaddafi: NATO should run the show, but some American warplanes are still needed in the fight." In the editorial, the paper pushes the administration to commit more warplanes to the NATO operation in Libya to finally break Gaddafi's forces.<sup>34</sup> This editorial is complemented by another piece a week later. In the April 15 editorial, the *Times* again calls for a more aggressive military posture against Gaddafi and his forces, arguing that the coalition must deepen its commitment to rebels and stop blaming each other for the disappointing "state of affairs" on the ground. The paper urges the United States and its NATO partners to dedicate themselves to a renewed sense of purpose in Libya by strengthening the military coalition inside Libya to topple Gaddafi.<sup>35</sup>

Three weeks later, the *Times* arguably publishes its most pro-interventionist editorial relating to the American and NATO intervention in Libya. In the piece, dated May 6, 2011, the paper urges that as Gaddafi's forces are disorganized and on the verge of defeat, NATO should commit substantial military means to "tip the balance" in favor of the Libyan rebels.<sup>36</sup> These pieces seem to adopt the approach of liberal interventionists who identify the use of military force as a way of pressuring regime change. This sentiment is conveyed again in a May 18, 2011 editorial. Under the headline, "President

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<sup>34</sup> "Keeping Ahead of Gaddafi: NATO should run the show, but some American warplanes are still needed in the fight." *The New York Times*. Editorial. April 8, 2011.

<sup>35</sup> "Stop the Blame Game: Libyan rebels need support from a unified coalition with a strategy for the long haul." *The New York Times*. Editorial. April 15, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> "Stalled Mission in Libya: NATO members need to end their squabbling and ramp up the pressure now." *The New York Times*. Editorial. May 6, 2011.

Obama and the Arab Spring: His speech on Thursday must articulate support for democratic change--and a peace deal,” the piece turns to the broader question of democratic change in the Arab world. To what extent, the editorial asks, can military action in Libya under the pretext of supporting an anti-authoritarian revolt be extrapolated to reflect the greater change occurring within the region.<sup>37</sup>

Contrastingly, *The New York Times* does not question the motives for military action in Libya but expresses frustration for how regime change can be replicated across the region through support of anti-authoritarian movements across the Arab world. A May 20, 2011 editorial similarly functions by way of promoting coercive democracy in the region. Under the caption, “Peace and Change: President Obama said many right things about the Arab Spring, but he can't stop there,” the paper praises President Obama for promising to support democratic movements in the Middle East. However, the report also criticizes Obama for not including a more comprehensive vision of the “promises and challenges” now underway in the Arab world.<sup>38</sup> In this sense, *The Times*’ is further committing itself to the liberal interventionist vision that supports the removal of oppressive regimes through military force, but challenges the Obama administration to present a broader strategy for how this can be accomplished.

*The Washington Post*’s coverage generally supported military intervention in Libya on humanitarian grounds. Much as *The New York Times* endorsed the broader ideal of ousting Gaddafi for the immediate protection of civilians and the historical menace the Libyan regime posed to western interests, the *Post*’s commentary locates similar

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<sup>37</sup> “President Obama and the Arab Spring: His speech on Thursday must articulate support for democratic change--and a peace deal.” *The New York Times*. Editorial. May, 18, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> “Peace and Change: President Obama said many right things about the Arab Spring, but he can't stop there.” *The New York Times*. Editorial. May 20, 2011.



inconsistencies with President Obama's strategic vision of military disengagement. A great deal of the editorial pieces from March to June 2011 celebrate the American and NATO military action taken against Gaddafi. However, the publication warns that Obama's ambivalence towards using force to support democratic movements in the Arab world risks an unraveling of the western coalition.

*The Washington Post's* editorial campaign relating to the Libyan crisis begins on March 9, 2011 with a piece focused on the impact that reduced crude exports from Libya would have on the western economic recovery. Referencing the possibility of a global reduction in demand, coupled with the spiraling political situation in the Middle East in March 2011, the *Post* asserts that the proposed gas tax would be a short term gain for the U.S. Treasury in shoring up additional revenue and preventing the flow of additional funds to authoritarian regimes in light of emerging events in the Middle East.<sup>39</sup> However, the substance of the editorial barely addresses the geopolitical consequences of the military intervention in Libya by U.S. and NATO forces. Then, on March 19, 2011, the Washington-based publication writes that the United States and the international community has a chance to defend democratic values in Libya. If, as *The Washington Post* warns, the western world fails to stand up for these values, the international community's response would be "rendered hollow" with regard to any future actions taken in Libya. In a sense, the March 19th editorial is arguably the most aggressive in terms of pushing the international coalition to adopt the liberal interventionist approach of forcing democratic change in Libya.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, an underlying criticism in this

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<sup>39</sup> "A Crude Idea." *The Washington Post*. Editorial. March 9, 2011.

<sup>40</sup> "A Chance in Libya." *The Washington Post*. Editorial. March 9, 2011.

editorial is the notion that the Obama administration lacks an integrated organizing principle that coherently articulates the American policy in Libya.

The editorial disapproval on March 19th is confirmed in a subsequent publication several days later with the unfavorable headline “Confused in Libya.” The editorial writes that “another abdication of leadership won't free Mr. Obama from Libya for long.” The piece describes a scenario where the western coalition fails to adequately support the rebel forces. In turn, this lack of armed support has the potential to produce a military stalemate between *thuwaar* forces and regime-backed militias, which ultimately leaves Gaddafi in power as part of a negotiated settlement. As the paper outlines, the risk in this approach is a greater humanitarian catastrophe. The solution, as the *Post* suggests, is a total commitment to the objective of removing Gaddafi. As this editorial demonstrates, a general theme among the major American publications is support for military action while, at the same time, challenging the administration as to how the Libyan issue fits into a broader policy of engagement with the Arab world. The criticism situates itself by questioning the Obama administration's genuine commitment to supporting anti-authoritarian and democratic movements in the Arab world.

A substantial amount of evidence exists which supports the claim that major news publications were cheerleading for airstrikes in Libya. In fact, on March 29, 2011, during the same time President Obama gave his policy speech on Libya at the National Defense University, *The Washington Post* writes that the opening airstrikes in Libya were a definite success in the protection of the rebel-held city of Benghazi.<sup>41</sup> Without any reference to Pentagon studies or interviews with rebel leaders on the ground, the *Post*

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<sup>41</sup> “Mr. Obama speaks on Libya.” *The Washington Post*. Editorial. March 29, 2011.

declares that without the initial strikes performed by allied forces, Gaddafi would have certainly destroyed the coastal city in Eastern Libya. While this may be true, the sentiment of these editorials creates the impression that *The Washington Post* and other media outlets were supportive of the military campaign in Libya for a variety of reasons that are neither consistent nor possessing an appropriate appreciation for the complicated political dynamics undergirding military engagement in the region. In keeping with its hawkish posture towards Libya, the paper criticizes the decision to transfer the primary responsibility for the Libyan campaign from the United States to NATO. In the April 6, 2011 issue, the *Post* suggests that such a transition would minimize the impact of the American AC-130 and A-10 Warthog planes that had devastated regime military assets in their march towards Benghazi.<sup>42</sup> Two weeks later, in a corresponding editorial, the paper decries what it deems a stalemate in Libya between NATO and the rebel groups they were supporting. As the paper contends, the absence of the American aircraft was the reason for this prolonged battle, which resulted in a greater number of casualties than required had the formal operations remained under the command of American forces.<sup>43</sup> The editorial cites an unnamed rebel who reports that the effectiveness of the NATO airstrikes degraded with the lack of American air cover and support, leading to a resurgence of pro-Gaddafi forces in Misurata.

From late April to the end of May 2011, *The Washington Post* publishes several editorials which continue to question the broader strategy of the United States policy in Libya. In addition, this is one of the first times that any major publication begins detailing the internal friction within the administration over Libya and Middle East policy, in

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<sup>42</sup> "Ground in Libya." *The Washington Post*. Editorial. April 6, 2011.

<sup>43</sup> "The Libyan Stalemate." *The Washington Post*. Editorial. April 17, 2011.

general. On May 1, 2011, in an editorial titled “A strategy of slowness,” the paper recalls several of the administrations reactions towards pivotal events during the Arab Spring. The piece concludes that the administration has not only failed to develop a coherent policy addressing the emerging desire for democracy in the Arab world, but that President Obama has only supported protesters after it was evident that the authoritarian rulers had no sustainable path to maintain power in their respective countries.<sup>44</sup> Roughly three weeks later, *The Washington Post* makes it known that it rejects the notion that American participation in the Libyan intervention requires congressional approval as the NATO operation is directed by a group of member countries, which happens to include the United States. On the same day, the *Post* runs an additional editorial claiming that at long last the administration has supplied coherence to a confused policy in Libya.<sup>45</sup> This editorial is interesting in light of the fact that no substantial policy changes occurred either on the ground in Libya or in the domestic political space which could have shaped the dynamics of the intervention. Perhaps, the paper was referring to a general improvement in conditions among civilians who had been targeted for weeks by pro-regime forces.

Finally, *The Washington Post* publishes its last editorial on the Libyan issue within the prescribed time frame. In this piece, the paper loosely addresses the question of credibility by describing the interests of Great Britain, France, and the United States in Libya and how this is creating conflict within the alliance. Intimating that French President Sarkozy’s continue appeals for additional U.S. military assistance is falling on deaf ears with President Obama, the paper chronicles how internal divisions within the

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<sup>44</sup> “A Strategy of Slowness?” *The Washington Post*. Editorial. May 1, 2011.

<sup>45</sup> “A New Mideast Policy.” *The Washington Post*. Editorial. May 20, 2011.

coalition has led to opposing policy aims in Libya. This assessment appears to draw on past examples of how an undisciplined coalition with different policy aims created poor leadership throughout the NATO operation to date.

Most notably, *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial coverage of U.S. military action in the Libyan crisis addresses questions of credibility in the context of U.S. economic interests. Having said that, editorial positions are not solely confined to the economic implications of the political turmoil within the Arab Maghreb. For example, on February 26, 2011, *The Wall Street Journal* publishes a piece suggesting that France could be outflanking the U.S. in a Berlin-esque march towards Tripoli to protect protesters from a regime crackdown.<sup>46</sup> Yet, it is roughly ten days later that the *Journal* advocates for a more direct U.S. response to the deteriorating situation in Libya. In a piece titled “Obama’s Libyan Abdication,” the *Journal* challenges the administration to meet the democratic ideals set out by the newly formed National Transitional Temporary Council with a more lenient approach towards arms transfers among rebel groups opposing Gaddafi.<sup>47</sup> The New York-based financial publication suggests that the arms embargo established by U.N.S.C. 1973 should only apply to the Gaddafi regime. In this sense, the paper is arguing a policy goal of tipping the military balance in favor of the rebel groups.

In a similar fashion, on March 12, the paper reports that the ambiguous language of the U.N. arms embargo affords sufficient legal latitude for the western coalition to only recognize it as applying to the Gaddafi regime. In this piece, *The Wall Street Journal* also reports that NATO was involved in “a series of conversations about a wide range of options” given the U.N. mandate and whether these provisions applied to all

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<sup>46</sup> “Outflanked by France.” *The Wall Street Journal*. Editorial. February 26, 2011.

<sup>47</sup> “Obama’s Libyan Abdication.” *The Wall Street Journal*. Editorial. March 7, 2011.

parties in the Libyan conflict.<sup>48</sup> Much as the *Washington Post* reports on the possibility of a military stalemate in the event that the U.S. and NATO fall short of supporting the rebel groups in eastern Libya, the *Journal* writes that the danger of a coalition style campaign is the opportunity Gaddafi might see in exploiting the political and economic divisions within the international partnership. As the paper contends, this runs the risk of leaving Gaddafi in power in the event that no credible opposition group emerges.<sup>49</sup> Unlike the other two publications referenced in this work, *The Wall Street Journal* is the only paper that devotes an entire editorial to the danger of an indefinite military campaign adding to the U.S. national deficit.

In an editorial on March 29, 2011, the paper suggests that while segments of the electorate are unhappy with President Obama bowing to the international community, others express frustration with another foreign intervention on the heels of Iraq and Afghanistan.<sup>50</sup> However, this sentiment is balanced by an editorial on April 4, 2011, which presents the risks if the United States fails to pick a side in the Arab revolt. Providing the example of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon and the security challenges posed to the United States, *The Wall Street Journal* makes clear that a coherent policy of military partnership and investment with rebel groups is preferable to inconsistent action.<sup>51</sup> This critique that the Obama administration is participating in the military campaign out of international peer pressure without any desire to pick winners and losers in the conflict is reflected in an April 22, 2011 piece. In a final editorial report, entitled “Coalition of the Ambivalent,” the *Journal* claims that while Great Britain and France are

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<sup>48</sup> “The Obama Doctrine.” *The Wall Street Journal*. Editorial. March 12, 2011.

<sup>49</sup> “War by Global Committee.” *The Wall Street Journal*. Editorial. March 21, 2011.

<sup>50</sup> “Obama, Libya and The GOP.” *The Wall Street Journal*. Editorial. March 29, 2011.

<sup>51</sup> “The Arab Revolt and U.S. Interests.” *The Wall Street Journal*. Editorial. April 4, 2011.

supporting the rebels headquartered in Benghazi, the U.S. has only authorized a paltry \$25 million in direct support to rebel groups.<sup>52</sup> However, these figures do not take into account the previous campaign directed solely by the U.S. before operational responsibility was fully transferred to NATO. In the final analysis, *The Wall Street Journal* editorials within the aforementioned time frame set out to present an alternative policy approach with more specificity compared to either The New York Times or The Washington Post. However, The Wall Street Journal also expresses a greater degree of frustration with implementing a Middle East strategy that can appropriately account for the economic implications of further military engagement in Libya.

#### **LIBYA IN REVIEW: POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES**

The geopolitical consequences of the 2011 Libyan intervention are relevant to questions concerning political credibility. First, the instability created by bringing down Gaddafi's regime has "recklessly uncorked" Libya to a flood of refugees and economic migrants who are now escaping into Europe (Friedman 2016). The implications of this phenomenon are worthy of additional research. As of March 2018, the long-enduring allegations that Gaddafi funded former French President Nicolas Sarkozy's political campaigns has led to the opening of a formal investigation in France. Sarkozy denies any wrongdoing.

The U.S. military intervention in Libya not only exposed divisions within the American alliance system but produced domestic political consequences for President Obama that had far reaching implications for the American political landscape. The political significance of the Libyan intervention raised questions of judgement as to

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<sup>52</sup> "Coalition of the Ambivalent." *The Wall Street Journal*. Editorial. April 22, 2011.

whether the president's foreign policy lacked coherence in a world of complicated partnerships and alliances in the Arab region. As academic and media coverage demonstrates, the liberal interventionists within the administration and foreign policy establishment identified the president's foreign policy realism as a threat to future American support for intervening in and preventing humanitarian disasters (Goldberg 2016). Towards this end, the credibility problem for President Obama was located within elite foreign policy circles who maintained a preference for military action despite his broader military disengagement in the region. Yet, the greatest domestic political consequence of the Libyan intervention was perhaps the congressional investigations into the 2012 Benghazi attacks on a U.S. diplomatic and intelligence outpost in eastern Libya. The investigation, under the authority of the House Select Committee on Benghazi, demanded that the State Department turn over all of Clinton's emails to see "what she and others knew about the deadly attack in Libya and the response by the U.S. government" (O'Harrow 2016). However, the State Department held no collection of emails from Clinton's tenure as the nation's top diplomat. In the process of seeking to obtain communications relevant to the Benghazi investigation, the Select Committee uncovered Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server. The degree to which this discovery upended the domestic political environment as Democratic and Republican candidates began heading into the 2016 presidential primaries cannot be overstated. Clinton's tenure at the State Department was supposed to be central to her rationale for running for president.

As polling shows, the Benghazi committee's uncovering of security failures in Libya damaged Secretary Clinton's credibility and the meticulously cultivated image of



her as a capable foreign policy actor (Simendinger 2016). The perception that Clinton was dissembling in the immediate aftermath of the Benghazi attacks and throughout the early part of her presidential bid as it relates to the emails concerning Libya fed into concerns that Clinton lacked the political credibility to be president (Simendinger 2016). Yet, in retrospect, Hillary Clinton's political vulnerability did not seem to impact President Obama's political fortunes. President Obama won re-election in November 2012 (roughly two months after the Benghazi attacks) despite this issue hanging over the race.

The media is an essential component in investigating and, ultimately, judging potential credibility issues. In the wake of the Libyan intervention, the editorial sections of the three main news publishers were, at times, openly cheering for an American military role in ousting Gaddafi. While criticism existed of the Obama administration policy in Libya, it generally towed the liberal interventionist line and requested a comprehensive plan for removing Gaddafi and restoring stability in Libya. In this sense, there was not a substantial amount of editorial coverage that questioned America's fundamental interests in Libya.

In a broader sense, the central credibility question for Obama was located outside the realm of public opinion. Among foreign policy actors, the suspicion that something went awfully wrong in Libya produced questions as to why a presidential administration dedicated to restoring stability in the Middle East would launch an intervention that resembled a classic regime change operation. Consequently, this type of scrutiny compromises a fundamental pillar of political credibility, which is the ability of a president to maintain believability in his policy actions.

## CONCLUSION/FINDINGS

While no universal truths regarding presidential credibility were captured in this project, it can be asserted that presidents do face political consequences, sometimes devastating consequences, for misleading the American public. Yet, the severity of the political implications that presidents are confronted with are often shaped by how clear the potential credibility problem is for the public to digest. In the case of George H.W. Bush and “no new taxes,” the clarity of his broken promise in terms of how the American public perceived it along with his previous statements on the subject made it impossible for him to escape the fall out. Moreover, the political price that Bush paid was much easier to determine based on the fact that both a primary challenger as well as Bush’s general election opponent in the ’92 campaign repeatedly used his broken promise against him. Bush lost his re-election bid in large part because of this broken promise. While raising taxes in 1991 was arguably good policy in that it restored fiscal discipline to the federal budget process, Bush undermined his own credibility with the conservative base that elected him.

President Obama’s policy in Libya is different. The complexity of the struggle inside Libya and the speed at which the conflict was developing on the ground changed the political calculus for President Obama and the western alliance. While the president campaigned on an anti-war platform in Iraq, the intensity of the emerging threat on the ground, principally the danger Gaddafi posed to civilians, tipped the scale in favor of a U.S. led intervention. While President Obama favored a foreign policy that reduced America’s investment in the Middle East and Arab world, he also understood that the United States needed to defend certain values. Sometimes, this required the use of

military force. In the wake of the Arab Spring in 2011, the Bedouin Libyan dictator appeared as though he would systematically butcher his own people if it preserved his hold on power. In addition, the pressure that Great Britain and France were putting on the Obama administration to get involved in the conflict was enormous and, arguably, decisive.

Furthermore, as polling shows, while the majority of American voters opposed another foreign intervention on the heels of Iraq and Afghanistan, they did not see Obama's decision to intervene in Libya as constituting a credibility problem. Rather, a sense that the U.S. policy in Libya was deceptively sold to the public as humanitarian relief was almost exclusively located within the confines of foreign policy and political circles. A part of this elite group viewed the military intervention through the lens of regime change. As Gaddafi was ultimately dethroned and subsequently killed in October 2011, the suspicion among foreign policy realists was only hardened that liberal interventionists seized on the humanitarian crisis in Libya as a way to take down an adversarial ruler. Yet, this cannot be considered a credibility issue in the same way as Bush's broken promise. First, President Obama won re-election in 2012 even after the explosive events in Benghazi on September 11, 2012, which left a U.S. ambassador killed. Secondly, the majority of voters did not perceive the Libyan issue with the same intensity as experts and political insiders who opposed the intervention. In the last analysis, the notion that Obama's credibility was damaged as a result of the faulty pretext for an American intervention in Libya was not widely shared among voters even though a substantial portion of them opposed another war in the region. By applying these standards, one can conclude that President Obama's credibility problem was limited.

In both cases, the press played a significant role in deciding how the issues would be framed for the public. During a content analysis of the editorial positions of the three main American news publishers, it was observed that the press often maintained a consistent position on the issues that, at times, became part of the story. In some instances, both Presidents Bush and Obama responded to the press coverage that “no new taxes” or the U.S. intervention was receiving, respectively. In short, the media was fundamental in deciding how possible credibility issues were relayed to the public. Yet, despite the negative reaction that the media would sometimes receive based on their coverage, this component of the democratic process worked to keep the American public informed on presidential policies and actions in both case studies described above. At a fundamental level, credibility can only be accurately measured by an informed citizenry. Towards this end, one can reasonably conclude that without a strong and independent press, the ability of the American public to understand the credibility issues facing a president are greatly diminished.

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