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COGNITIVE THEORY: A QUALITATIVE COMPARISON OF  
THE GEORGE W. BUSH ADMINISTRATION AND  
THE BARACK H. OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

by

SHELLEY L URBANOVICH

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Political Science  
in the College of Science and in the Burnett Honors  
College at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

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Thesis Chair: Dr. David Patrick Houghton

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## **Abstract**

Although Republicans and Democrats frequently disagree ideologically, the leaders of both parties share one commonality in particular—they inevitably make flawed judgments. To adequately understand the extent to which psychological filters act as a fundamental factor in decision making, this thesis shall analyze current political events and observe how partisans within both administrations deal with information incompatible with their own values and beliefs. Specifically referencing the war in Iraq, weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), civil unrest, national security, the national economic climate, and the housing market, this study examines the way leaders deal differently with conflicting information. Although all subjects in the latter shall be discussed, the primary focus is directed towards weapons of mass destruction during the Bush administration and the economic climate during the Obama administration. During their presidencies, both administrations faced different circumstances and congruently possessed different ideologies in respect of how to resolve current problems. Therefore, both President Obama and Bush shall equally be observed in order to adequately compare the extent to which each succumbs to cognitive biases when faced with dissonant information. In addition, groupthink theory, schema theory, and self-justification shall be discussed as complimentary forces which impair political members' decisions. Overall, qualitatively assessing both Republican and Democratic parties in one comprehensive examination breaks the bounds of usual political science studies because both partisans are linked more by their similarities than differences.

## **Acknowledgements**

I am truly indebted to all who assisted me in the process of completing my undergraduate thesis. First and foremost, my success would not have been possible without the guidance and support of my thesis chair, Dr. Houghton. His extensive knowledge in government policy and political psychology has opened my eyes and has increased my respect for the field. Moreover, I would like to express deep thanks to my committee members, Dr. Smither and Dr. Dolan for their support and thoughtful advice. Additionally, I wish to extend gratitude to my parents, who encouraged me every step of the way. Without all of these selfless people, this process would have been infeasible—thank you all for making this an enjoyable experience.

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## Introduction

We all find it hard to admit that we're wrong. Even in the mundane circumstances of everyday life, people are subject to using mechanisms which justify their actions—regardless of how unethical, illogical, or bluntly wrong these actions may be. We rationalize away our errors, place blame on others, justify our actions; yet, rarely do we admit our own faults. Inevitably, we go to great lengths to regain a cohesive perception of ourselves and at all times strive to maintain this perception.

Politicians are only different in that their perceptions of reality have the greater potential to affect a large population. They too are fallible human beings. Just as we dislike admitting to our errors, political actors use many rationalization processes in their desperate search for consonance. Oftentimes, political figures fall short on their promises or make decisions that in retrospect could have turned out for the better if they addressed the situation differently. As a result, politicians must learn to deal with uncomfortable information, and inevitably the mistakes they have made. This study shall examine the Obama Administration and the Bush administration, but rather than contrasting both the administrations, they shall be compared by their similarities. As boundedly *irrational* human beings, it is only natural for both political leaders to make mistakes or overestimate their probability of success.

Two main sections divide the administrations (the first half of the thesis assesses the Bush administration and the second half assesses the Obama administration). Although this organizational scheme divides into two separate units, both presidents are compared by a variety of cognitive limitations: (a) cognitive dissonance, (b) cognitive consistency, (c) self-

justification, (d) schema theory, (e) groupthink, and (f) self-fulfilling prophesy. No matter the party affiliation, personal perspectives, or circumstantial differences, both presidents are bound together by the natural impulse to justify their actions and remain consistent with their own beliefs. All political decisions are based primarily off of cognitive processes, and whether these processes are rational or boundedly irrational, are the major points of interest. The latter shall discuss different cognitive filters used in decision making, interpret whether these psychological biases have any real effect on the political actors, and then shall examine the degree to which the cognitive filter (if any) distorts a political actor's behavior.

### Methodology

No other study has attempted to draw similarities in the rational thought processes of two very dissimilar political figures. In this qualitative analysis, Bush's decision to invade Iraq and his other administrative policies were radically different from Obama's strategy to aid economic development. Both administrations, however, used similar rationalization processes when faced with dissonant information.

Examining cognitive bias and its effect on political behavior is an innovative project to undertake because no previous studies have linked two former administrations of diverging political backgrounds by their similarities. Although both parties differ on many central issues, decision making in general is ambiguous in the political field; therefore, the Obama and Bush administrations are linked by their susceptibility to making flawed judgments or overestimating the chance for success. Far too often, Democrat and Republican parties are severed by their

differences—this thesis observes quite the opposite. Rather than contrasting Democrats and Republicans, they shall more so be compared by their similarities.

In an ideal situation, it would be beneficial to draw all similarities through primary sources; however, primary sources are often unavailable. While some primary sources shall be used, such as the memoirs of President George W. Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, and Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, most of the accounts come from secondary sources. Bob Woodward's *Plan of Attack*, *Bush at War*, *The War Within*, and *State of Denial*, are secondary sources which detail many of the obstacles that Bush encounters while in office (Woodward 2002, 2004, 2008, 2009). Additional books are used to address Obama's economic plan. They include Ron Suskind's *Confidence Men*, Noam Scheiber's *The Escape Artists*, Jeffrey Alexander's *The Performance of Politics*, and Thomas Rick's *Fiasco* (Alexander, 2012; Scheiber, 2011; Suskind, 2011; Rick, 2003). Other supplementary sources include academic journals, news articles from the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, and government documents from the National Security Archive. Many of these documents and books provide rich public statements where leaders and administrators describe success or failure in detail. The media in particular has a tendency to catch political actors off guard, allowing bits of information to seep into public awareness. For this reason, transcripts from public speeches, talk shows, and political pundits are other sources available that aid in the qualitative analysis of cognitive biases, cognitive shortcuts, and rationalization processes. For the purposes of this thesis, all sources identified shall be used to address the similarities between parties.

In view of the fact that both presidents' actions were influenced by their colleagues, administrative bodies surrounding both presidents (such as economic advisors, military officials,

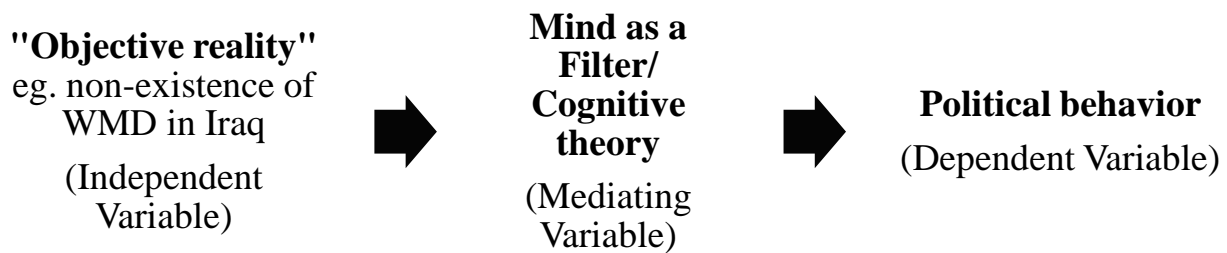
and cabinet members) must be similarly observed when assessing leaders' decisions. By observing the two leaders and their administrations, this thesis will qualitatively measure the extent to which both administrations use denial and cognitive reasoning to remain consistent with their own beliefs. Aside from administration's varying and divergent political views, both administrations inevitably make mistakes, and therefore use defense mechanisms in order to rationalize their faults. Irrevocably, no human is immune to cognitive bias; therefore, at some point, psychological filters aid in the political decision making process when no one answer is definitively clear.

Holistically, this thesis examines the relationship between reality based on factual information and the way people perceive what is plausible and what is fictional in their world. Cognitive theory [i.e. self-justification, cognitive dissonance, schema theory, self-fulfilling prophesy] acts as the mediating variable, and people's political behavior acts as the dependent variable.

## Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: (George W. Bush, Barack Obama Administration)

In a comparison of individuals, information (or objective reality) is likely to alter a person's political behavior by means of psychological filters than reality that is definitive.



**Figure 1: Relationship Between the Independent and Dependent Variable**

Hypothesis 2: The Bush Administration

In a comparison of individuals, information (or objective reality) is likely to alter the Bush Administration's political behavior by means of psychological filters [i.e. cognitive consistency, self-justification, and groupthink] than reality that is definitive.

Hypothesis 3: The Obama Administration

In a comparison of individuals, information (or objective reality) is likely to alter the Obama Administration's political behavior by means of psychological filters [i.e. schema theory, cognitive consistency theory, self-fulfilling prophesy, and groupthink] than reality that is definitive.

## Cognitive Theory

Psychological filtering is the mediating variable which manipulates research outcome in this case study. As described in the former hypothesis, psychological mechanisms are used to alleviate discomfort in human cognition. Although psychological filtering in the attempt to alleviate discomfort is commonly recognized in the psychology community, the degree to which psychological filters influence decision making in both administrations remains relatively unexamined. Each case study, therefore, shall focus primarily on the *degree* that cognitive barriers influence an administration's political actions.

The following sub-sections outline basic cognitive theory. The analysis between the two administrations is based off research conducted by social scientists including Susan Fiske, Shelley Taylor, Leon Festinger, Drew Westen, Carol Tavris, Elliot Aronson, and Irving Janis. Their theories provide the fundamental basis for research within each case study, and allow for enhanced understanding of cognition in general.

Due to the fact that cognition is a very broad area of study, the qualitative comparison will be limited to a few theories. These theories explain different types of cognitive error. At times, different cognitive theories are used within each case study; however, this does not hinder the comparison between administrations because the evaluation is not based on one particular type of theoretical cognitive process. Varying cognitive theories used to explain administrative actions are intended to complement one another rather than to set the two administrations apart.

Before cognitive theory is applied to the Bush and Obama administrations, the basic cognitive theories which will be used to explain mediating variable in both administration's decision making processes must be adequately addressed. The following sub-sections are used to

detail the basics of the specific cognitive theory which will be used. The sub-sections are as follows: (a), Neuroscience: Reconfirming Cognitive Thinking, (b) Cognitive Consistency Theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory, (c) Self-Justification, (d) Groupthink, and (e) Schema Theory. Each theoretical perspective on how people process information brings new insight to the discussion, and demonstrates how varying cognitive filters have the ability to manipulate political action.

### Neuroscience Reconfirming Cognitive Thinking

Neuroscience provides ample physical evidence confirming the basis of all cognitive theory; therefore, it is only reasonable that it should be discussed first. Although cognitive consistency theory was highly popular in the 1950's and 1960's, its popularity diminished over the last few decades. According to Susan Fiske and Shelley Taylor, consistency theories became less dominant because "it was difficult to predict what a person would perceive as inconsistent and to what degree" (cited in Houghton 2009, pp. 117). Without accurate and reasonable means of measurement, such theories were challenged for the reason that they could never adequately be disproven.

With developing technology, however, neuroscience may provide a compelling link between cognitive theory and empirical evidence to draw scientifically accurate conclusions. In Drew Westen's book, *The Political Brain*, not only does neuroscience provide factual evidence linking cognitive dissonance and consistency with actual cognition occurring in the reasoning and emotional parts of the brain, it provides a cogent correlation between emotional thinking and



rationalization. In his experiment, Westen studies the brain's neurological functioning by means of a fMRI machine. He, therefore, is able to physically assess stimulation in the brain when people are faced with dissonant information. Westen formulated four hypotheses:

- “First, we expected that threatening information—even if partisans didn’t acknowledge it was threatening—would activate neurological circuits shown in prior studies to be associated with negative emotional states.”
- “Second, we expected to see activations in a part of the brain heavily involved in regulating emotions. Our hunch was that what passes for reasoning in politics is more often rationalization, motivated by efforts to reason to emotionally satisfying conclusions.”
- “Third, we expected to see a brain in conflict—conflict between what a reasonable person could believe and what a partisan would want to believe. Thus, we predicted activations in a region known to be involved in monitoring and resolving conflicts.”
- “Finally, we expected subjects to ‘reason with their gut’ rather than to analyze the merits of the case. Thus, we didn’t expect to see strong activations in parts of the brain that had ‘turned on’ in every prior study of reasoning, even though we were presenting partisans with a reasoning task (to decide whether the two statements about their candidates were consistent or inconsistent)” (Westen, 2007, p. xi).

Providing partisans with contradictory information, Westen’s research struck a convincing conclusion. According to his study, emotions play a significant role in guiding what we perceive as rational thinking; whereas, rational thinking itself may not be as *rational* as originally perceived. As stated by Westen, subjects were “likely to ‘reason’ to emotionally biased conclusions, but we can trace their neural footprints as they do it” (2007, p. xiii). The groundbreaking study provided physical support for cognitive dissonance and other psychological theories which previously lost favorability.

Neuroscience allows researchers to gather information and quantify its effects on human behavior like never before. It establishes valid rationale for corresponding research based on a leader’s performance. Thanks to empirical evidence, political psychologists recently have broken through much skepticism when analyzing behavioral anomalies. Recent studies have been able to

link leaders' decisions with cognitive theory because they are now able to measure and observe physical, quantifiable, neurological stimulations within the human brain.

### Cognitive Consistency Theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory

In 1957, a theory changed forever our understanding of how political minds interpreted cognition. Leon Festinger contributed to the world what is now known as cognitive dissonance theory. Festinger postulated “if two cognitive elements are relevant, the relation between them is either dissonant or consonant. The magnitude of the dissonance increases as the importance or value of the elements increases.” Individuals exposed to dissonant information, or information contradicting their own beliefs, hence experience an emotional reaction. This emotional reaction, resulting from dissonance, “acts in the same way as a state of drive or need or tension.” Increased tension, or dissonance, results from increased inconsistency between a belief and the concept (Festinger, 1957, p. 16, 18).

Complimentary to cognitive dissonance, Cronkhite theorizes, “when an individual perceives two or more cognitions to be ‘dissonant,’ he experiences a state of drive or arousal.” Along with this, “the individual experiencing the state of drive or arousal will behave in such a way designed to reduce the drive” (1966, p. 392-399). When faced with conflicting evidence, more specifically attacking one’s “self-concept or some other firmly held expectancy,” humans will nonetheless strive to find cohesion with their own values and the world around them by neglecting to conform to outside information (Aronson, 1997). Plainly stated, a person encountering discomfoting information has two options: (a) he can adapt to the new

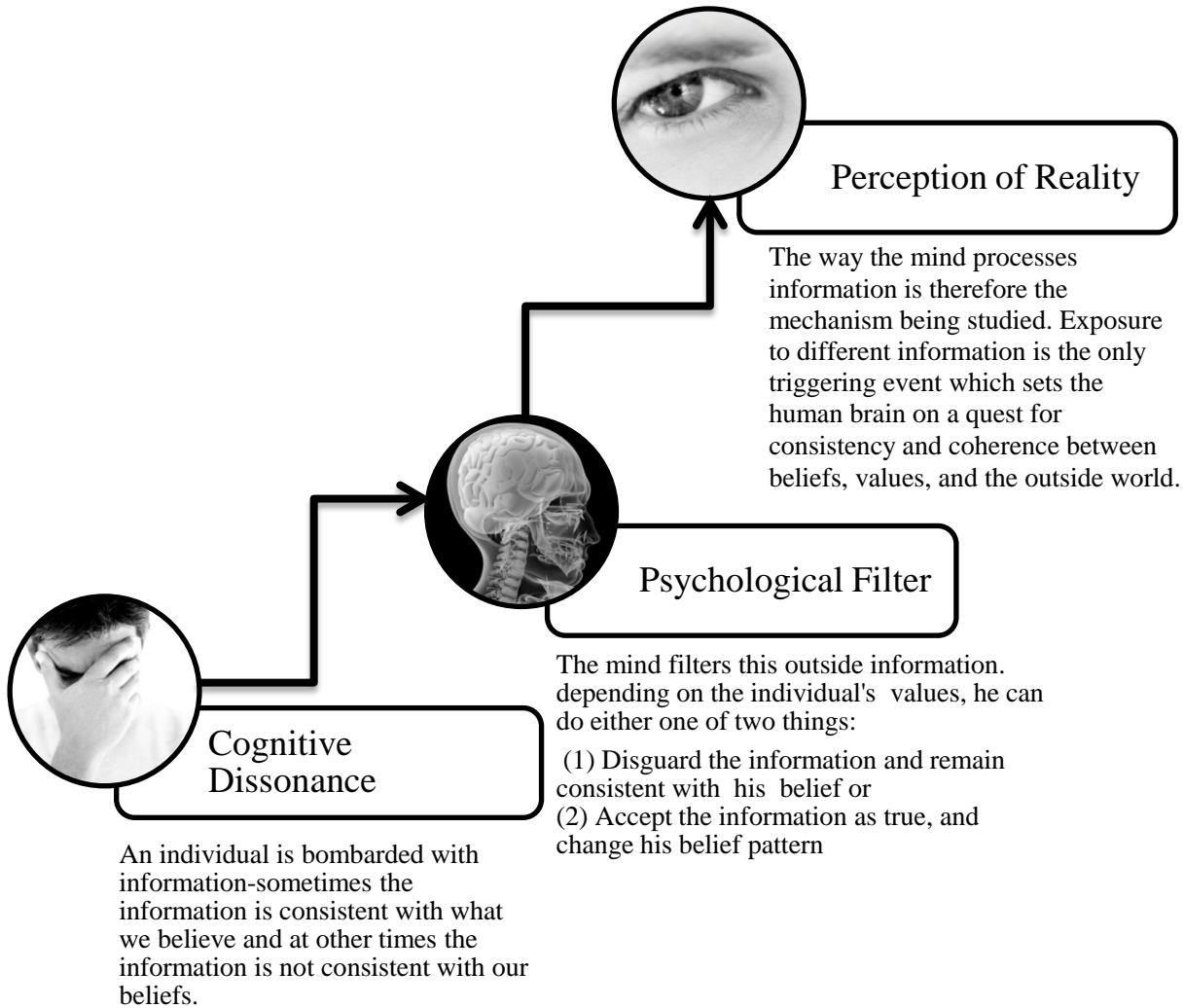
information, (b) he can choose to ignore the information and reconfirm his own assumptions to himself. The thought process where the human mind rationalizes away conflicting evidence is known as cognitive consistency. In relative congruence to cognitive dissonance, cognitive consistency theory places greater emphasis on one's active motivation to retain a particular opinion or belief. Cognitive consistency bases itself upon "rationalizing away the issue or disagreement," or through "adding some extra belief which reduces the dissonance" (Houghton, 2009, p. 117). Converging together, cognitive dissonance and cognitive consistency work simultaneously to form an emotional drive within an individual and therefore are a dynamic force in decision making.

### Motivated Bias and Unmotivated Bias

To determine whether cognitive dissonance is occurring, the observer must first identify whether the individual is basing decisions off of personal preference and unwavering beliefs or whether rational thought processes are actually occurring. This is the separating factor that divides motivated and unmotivated bias. As many psychologists suggest, people have a tendency to distort their perception of reality in order to shelter themselves from negative emotional reactions related to cognitive dissonance (i.e. Becker, 1973; Festinger, 1957; Freud, 1933 / 1964; Homey, 1937). This type of defensive maneuver has the ability to skew reality and may limit a decision maker's subjectivity.

When an individual bases judgment strictly on evidence, the thought process is believed to be unbiased and therefore unmotivated. Allowing emotional drives to entirely guide behavior, however, is not always the greatest plan of action. Exemplifying this are the 1955

### The Process of Cognitive Consistency



**Figure 2: The Process of Cognitive Consistency**

Armageddon prophecies by Marian Keech. In this classic example, masses of people were deceived into giving up all their possessions in preparation for an alien species to descend onto Earth. When the hour arrived, no aliens showed. Rather than admitting her error, Keech claimed another prophecy, which assured her followers that the world was spared because of their belief. Instead of becoming weary or angry, the group's certainty in their leader's vision was only strengthened (Festinger, 1956). Demonstrating the potentially catastrophic effects of cognitive dissonance, the scary reality remains—no one is immune.

Although this is a radical example it is important to note that Keech's followers and followers of many other irrational organizations are no less intelligent than the average individual. This only strengthens the potential danger of cognitive consistency. Cognitive dissonance has the ability to strip individuals of rational thinking, because it allows people to resort to emotional defense mechanisms. Such mechanisms are used to maintain an individual's beliefs and protect from emotional breakdown.

### Self-Justification

In harmony with cognitive consistency and dissonance, Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson argue that self-justification simultaneously works to “systematically distort our memories and account of the event to produce the maximum consonance between what happened and how we see ourselves.” Therefore, in order to maintain cognitive consistency, self-justification must be used as a “response to the offence or provocation as any reasonable, moral person would do” (2007, p.193). An individual tends not to view himself as a person with inherent negative

qualities such as selfishness, stubbornness, or aggressiveness; but nevertheless the true fact remains—people make inherently obvious mistakes. According to Tavris and Aronson, however, an individual is able to negate those mistakes by defending and qualifying himself. Particularly concentrating on the last two administrations, the George W. Bush administration and the Obama administration, an in-depth analysis will be conducted in order to determine how America’s most recent presidents deal with dissonant information and policy, as well as how both presidents and administrations conflict with an *us vs. them* ideology.

### Groupthink

Relating to cognitive dissonance and consistency, groupthink is another state of mind where a “group reaches a hasty or premature consensus and the group then becomes closed to outside ideas” (Janis, 1972). Individuals with relatively similar opinions congregate because they share values analogous to one another; therefore, their similar ideology allows them to agree on most decisions. Although groups, like those described in the latter, can effectively make decisions, group cohesion may also stimulate harmony and incessant agreement—which is a common side effect of groupthink and erroneous decision making. In accordance with Irving Janis’s theory, the social psychologist who first defined groupthink, specific additional elements occur when groupthink exists:

- “Insulation of the group from outside advice”
- “Aggressive and opinionated leadership”
- “A lack of norms requiring methodical procedures”
- “Homogeneity of members’ backgrounds/ideology”
- “High levels of stress”
- “Temporary low self-esteem”

Additionally, Janis provides a list of comprehensive criteria in order to diagnose groupthink in any type of collaborative situation (Janis, 1982):

- “An illusion of invulnerability”
- “Collective rationalization”
- “A belief in inherent morality of the group”
- “Stereotyped views of outgroups”
- “Direct pressure is exerted on dissenters”
- “Self-censorship”
- “An illusion of unanimity”
- “Self-appointed “mindguards”<sup>1</sup>”

As seen throughout history, cabinet members and officials close to decision makers often provide influential opinions and push an ideology consistent with those around them. In relation to foreign policy mishaps, the Bush administration’s overconfidence in their beliefs somewhat resembles the Bay of Pigs incident, where President Kennedy’s overconfidence in his administration almost turned detrimental for the entire nation.

Despite some negative repercussions, multiple advantages of group cohesion have been recognized. For example, individuals may acquire greater legitimacy when working in groups, political leaders may grant themselves security if other members of the political sphere join on a decision, and groups may unite eclectic variations of knowledge into one think-tank (Houghton, 2009, p. 69-70). According to the government politics approach, otherwise known as Model III, decisions are a result of *barging* and *compromise*. In this theory, decisions are based around a symbiotic relationship between major groups with differing ideas. Although decisions reached this way reflect “the least common denominator,” they scarcely resemble the initial policy or

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<sup>1</sup> Mindguards are members who emerge and take it upon themselves to protect the group and its leader from dissenting views. Mindguards also protect the group from information that might challenge the group’s assumed consensus. (Houghton 2009, p. 72)

idea (Allison & Zelikow, 1999). Using previously provided sources for the basis of analysis, both case studies examine whether group conformity exists.

Collective rationalization may occur when members are united in a single group. Therefore, groupthink theory works to compliment the other cognitive barriers used in this thesis because it mirrors what is occurring in an individual's mind. Ultimately, if groupthink occurs within either administration, an optimum strategy will be exchanged for a superfluous commitment.

### Schema Theory

Another way which people process information is through schemas. Schema theory is based upon the concept that people have a tendency to take cognitive shortcuts. Often, such shortcuts lead to making inaccurate assumptions about reality, while at other times schemas may provide a decision maker with an easy to understand generalization of a concept, object, person, or situation. As described by Sandra Bem of Cornell University "schema is a cognitive structure, a network of associations that organizes and guides an individual's perception" (1981, p. 355).

Schema theory is primarily depicted as the process which individuals categorize information into "mental boxes" (Houghton, 2009, p. 121). Although some schemas are shared, an individual's personal schema derives from life experiences. Schema creation, therefore, depends on situational factors. One individual's perception of a particular type of person may be completely different from another's. For example, someone's physical traits may evoke a



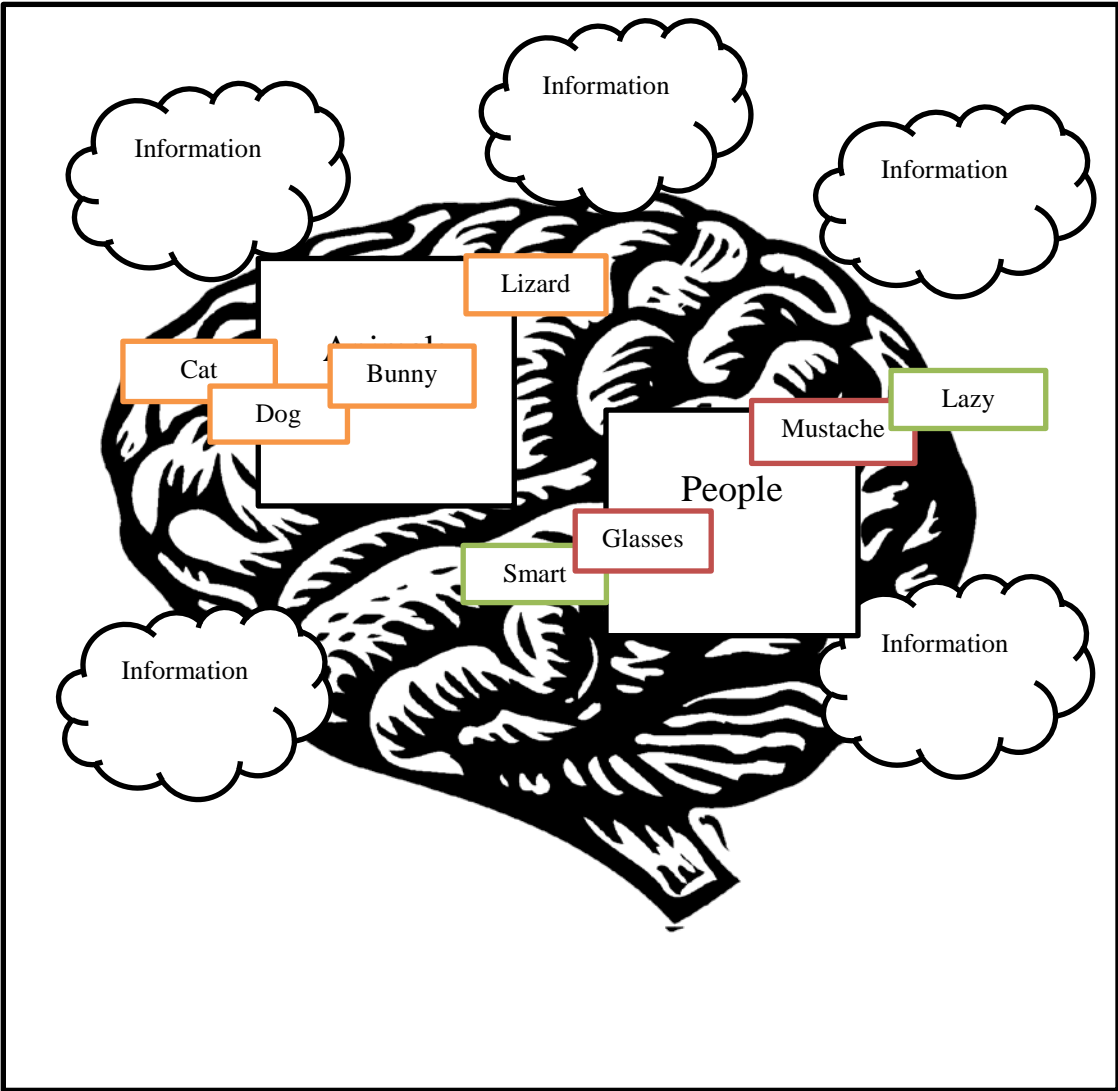
particular emotion within an observer. A person may be raised with a very lazy father and that father may happen to have a mustache. From past experience, that person may relate mustaches with laziness; and so, the individual may stereotype all others with mustaches as lazy people (Figure 3). This is because individual's perception is a "product of the interaction between incoming information and the perceiver's preexisting schema" (Bem, 1981, p. 355). In a similar example, smart people are commonly stereotyped as people who wear glasses, but this does not necessarily mean all people who wear glasses are smart. It also does not mean people who do not wear glasses are of limited mental capacity. Individuals forming assumptions in instances such as these are simply exercising their ability to make judgments based off of previously experienced stereotypes or situations.

In a similar, and perhaps more relatable account, default values are used to make cognitive judgments from a limited amount of clues. Take for example this puzzle: "I am thinking of 'a thing.' This thing has fur. It has a tail. It has paws. You take it for walks." (Houghton, 2009, p. 121). The last clue obviously allowed the reader to make the connection that this animal was in fact a dog. Although it shares similar characteristics with cats, or even some similarities with bunnies, dogs are primarily taken on walks as opposed to the other mammals. To further exemplify how schemas work, lizards are also added to the theoretical schema box inside an individual's head. Although lizards are placed in the same generic box of "animal" they are separated from the other animals presented in the schema box. This is because they lack many of the characteristics that bind the others together.

Granted that Figure 3 is an undeniably over simplistic version of the actual theory itself, it allows for a graphic conceptualization of the process. As an individual is constantly

bombarded with information, schemas allow for the organization of information. Once the information is categorized, the individual may relate it to other already developed schemas.

**Schema Theory and its Impact on Cognition**



**Figure 3: Schema Theory**

In relation to political analysis, schemas may act as useful cognitive mechanisms which allow political decision makers to go beyond information given and make adequate judgment on how to proceed. In contrast, a particular schema may make two situations, or people, appear very similar when in actuality they are nothing alike at all. To exemplify this is President Truman's perception of Joseph Stalin. Truman's old mentor, Tom Pendergast, appeared very similar to Stalin. For this reason, Truman began to trust the ruthless dictator off of superficial qualities. After several meetings, Truman's trust for Stalin increasingly grew. Stalin took advantage of this trust by backing down on several agreements with the president. (Popkin, 1993, p 363).

In this thesis, schema theory will be directly analyzed in accordance with the Obama administration. Comparisons are based off of historical events dating back to the 1920's. How leaders interpreted such events since the stock market crash of 1929, are basis for analysis. It shall determine whether accurate schemas depicting the current economic recession developed.

## **The Bush Administration**

No presidential administration makes flawless judgments. George W. Bush's administration is no exception. Countless errors most likely occur in every administration without public knowledge. Confidential information, especially dealing with war, is handled with sensitivity; therefore, the public is left to critique only the obvious miscalculations. In this case study, George W. Bush's presidency shall be examined. Different facets influencing his decision making process led to obvious errors, errors such as looking for Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), as well as the predicted duration and consequences resulting from the war in Iraq.

The Bush administration is faced with many difficult decisions based on ambiguous evidence; consequently the probability for error is high. As a result, members of the administration may attempt to alleviate such dissonant information by means of different psychological mechanisms. These psychological filters, how they are created, and how they influence decision making, will be explored in great detail in order to gain a better understanding of the political mind. The analysis of the George W. Bush administration shall particularly cover decision making processes and psychological filters used when conducting foreign policy and military strategy in the Middle East.

To understand in greater depth the impact of flawed decision making, psychological explanations aid as a mechanism to more accurately depict what occurred during these few years. The following psychological mechanisms will be discussed in further detail: (a) self-justification theory, (b) cognitive dissonance and pressures for cognitive consistency, (c) environments where groupthink may occur, (d) emotional intelligence and its effects on decision makers. Broadly speaking, this first section assesses the Bush decision making team. It is divided into specific

case studies which form each section. The following sections take a more in-depth approach to various cognitive barriers and examine specific cases where the Bush administration succumbed to various cognitive traps.

### Section 1: Motivated and Unmotivated Bias

Unmotivated bias exists independent of agenda or purpose, while motivated bias is contingent on an individual's purpose or goal. Therefore, motivated bias is a manifestation of individual or collective objective(s) to maintain a specific belief in order to achieve a specific goal or purposes. Unmotivated bias derives from the collective perception of facts. Although, in general, society may accept such facts as truth, subsequent examination may prove otherwise. The separating factor, therefore dividing motivated and unmotivated bias, depends upon a single element—whether or not the individual has motivation to maintain consonance. Section 1 examines these differences and interprets the degree which the Bush administration was influenced by cognitive pressure to remain consistent with a belief against the possibility of rational decision making deriving from ambiguity. Events used in the study are displayed in a historical context and despite the differences of motivated and unmotivated bias; both theoretical concepts may be used to assess different aspects of the administration's decision making.

Dating long before the 21<sup>st</sup> century, terrorist activity encouraged a political climate for war. Although many forget, the threat of Osama bin Laden predated 9/11. Before September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the terrorist's actions were recognized as precarious, so much so that he was placed at the top of Federal Bureau Investigation's (FBI) Most Wanted list. (FBI, 2001). Over the years,

Islamic extremism and an evolving relationship with America wounded such relations. As the Taliban grew in power, psychological distortions between clashing cultures developed into an almost inevitable dilemma.

Islamic extremism is thought to have developed as early as 1967 when the Six Day War between Israel and its neighboring Arab countries weakened socialist Arab nationalism. Intensified hatred for Americans by these extremist groups was further escalated during the Persian Gulf War. The US backed Kuwait in a military invasion had conducted what is known as operation Desert Shield in order to protect Saudi Arabian oil fields. After the Iraqi Republican Guard began its forceful raid, American troops intervened with multiple outlined objectives: “immediate, complete, and unconditional withdrawal of all Iraqi forces from Kuwait,” including the “restoration of Kuwait's legitimate government to replace the puppet regime installed by Iraq” (US News and World Report, 1992, p. 7-9). During this time, new intelligence led the Commander in Chief to formulate new ideas about Iraq’s capabilities. According to the National Security Archive, January 15, 1991, George H.W. Bush authorized “the use of force to expel Iraq from Kuwait. He identified Iraqi use of Weapons of Mass Destruction against allied forces as an action that would lead the U.S. to seek the removal of Saddam Hussein from power” (Richelson,2003). Similar beliefs would carry to new administrations, and inevitably, concentrated military action would persist during the next Republican Presidency— when George H.W. Bush’s eldest son, George W. Bush was sworn in as president.

After George H. W. Bush lost the presidential election to Bill Clinton, the new Democratic administration continued initiating precautions to protect the nation. Throughout the 1990s, provisions against al Qaeda (meaning “the Base” in Arabic) were taken. Declassified

documents from the State Department in 1996 indicated Osama bin Laden's move to Afghanistan, providing the terrorist with the momentum to expand radical Islam. The US government did nothing substantial to deter such movements and

“Two years after the State Department's warning, with Mr. bin Laden firmly entrenched in Afghanistan and overseeing terrorist training and financing operations, Al Qaeda struck two American embassies in East Africa, leading to failed military attempts by the Clinton administration to capture or kill him in Afghanistan” (Lichtblau, 2005).

In reaction to Osama bin Laden's aggressive movements, President Clinton increased the amount of “case officers” or undercover “spies and agents in foreign governments.” After Clinton's two terms in office, “Tenet had 10 times as many [case officers] in training, an incredible jump. It was designed to increase HUMINT and make covert action, if authorized by the president, possible” (Woodward, p.3, 2002). HUMINT, otherwise known as human intelligence, could provide Clinton, or any future president, with inside information to prevent or act against future attacks.

The same year, Osama bin Laden directly threatened US officials during an interview, claiming that he would strike “against ‘military passenger aircraft,’ mentioning surface-to-air missiles” (Shane, 2005). In congruence with the attacks symbolically directed toward all Americans, Tenet, the Director of Central Intelligence, had written a memorandum stating to top intelligence and CIA officials “We are at war. I want no resources or people spared in this effort.” The message received diminutive attention, however, when compared to a similar memo stating “We're at War” written by Tenet five days after the 9/11 attacks.

Public support is invaluable when engaging in war. Consequently, the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> propelled the nation and therefore its leaders into a different mindset. The social and political environment was greatly altered, creating an atmosphere where biased cognition

could easily propagate. In essence, the danger was no longer seen as something far away, the danger was palpable. When George W. Bush took office almost half a century passed from the time Islamic extremism noticeably spread, and as years came and went, psychological bias potentially grew in unison. Bias for President George W. Bush, in particular, may have expanded after his father took the position as Commander in Chief. President Bush identified Saddam one particular time as “the guy who tried to kill my dad” (Bamford, 2004, p. 255). Somewhat similarly, the American public frequently identified Osama bin Laden as a demonic figure. No one before had seen such devastation brought to American soil, not even those who witnessed Pearl Harbor. In one day 3,056 people perished. Numbers had not climbed this high since the Battle of Antietam during the American Civil War (Smith, 2012).

Proximity made the danger feel real, not only to the administration, but to citizens of the United States. In Casasanto’s study, a “complex relationship between spatial proximity, conceptual similarity, and perceptual similarity appears” (2008). Although Casasanto’s main hypothesis remains unanswered, he was able to conclude that “proximity and similarity are not unrelated; rather, they appear to be related in more complex ways than linguistic analyses alone can discover. As such, linguistic metaphors should be treated as a source of hypotheses about the structure of abstract concepts” (2008). This opens the possibility that proximity had a major psychological impact on the citizens that experienced 9/11. Rather than a problem half way around the world, the danger was brought to this nation. Although the continent is an enormous land mass, relatively speaking, the terrorist threat was spatially closer than ever before; therefore, it was perceptually closer as well.



Proximity and personal experience may have swayed the American public and the administration on one particular path leading to war and, to a degree, may have influenced Bush's rationale. If the motivation for war was based off of something other than pure rational cognitive processing, then it would be hard pressed to conclude that Bush's decision stemmed independently from unmotivated bias. As the evidence suggests, a combination of influences may have inclined Bush to make an impulsive decision.

As previously identified, Osama bin Laden was recognized as a terrorist mastermind long before President George W. Bush took office. Before September 11<sup>th</sup>, top officials were already preparing for military action in the Middle East. After the World Trade Center attacks, however, large amounts of public support created an opportune time to strike. An atmosphere of nationalism erupted within America. This potentially influenced the president as well. Proximity has the ability to make events appear more important. Just as favoritism is shown toward local news, as opposed to national or global news, people more readily relate to events occurring in propinquity. Conceptualization of what is near, however, varies from circumstance to circumstance. An influence area is characterized as the mental region where individuals form cognitive borders surrounding a perceived environment (Brennan & Martin, 2012). September 11<sup>th</sup> was a national crisis. It affected most if not all the citizens within the country. Consequently, Tenet's memo "We're at War" resonated with members of the administration far more than similar memo's released in the past. The emotional stage had to be set before any serious political action took place.

In this particular situation, Bush's cognitive error may not derive entirely from the desire to maintain consistency, but rather from the progression of time. In this singular case study,

Bush's cognition reflects "the general hazards that accompany decision making owing to the need to manage complexity, ambiguity, and the limits of individual cognitive capacities" (Renshon, 2008, p. 512). Unmotivated bias occurs when information is incorrectly interpreted, while motivated bias is intentionally used to maintain personal beliefs. As opposed to a motivated bias, where information is systematically distorted by the individual to maintain previously established perspectives, Bush's cognition implies that the political environment and the cultural dynamics developed over decades of foreign policy making may have counter intuitively impacted his decision making. Information and biases formed through experience and socialization (especially information obtained from George W. Bush's father and previous White house officials) may have distorted some information about Iraq, its capabilities, and therefore provided President George W. Bush with the rationale (and perhaps pressure) to invade Iraq.

Consequently, a combination of motivated and unmotivated cognitive processes (one deriving from cognitive consistency and the other deriving from general risks in decision making) allowed George W. Bush to formulate decisions and execute war strategy. Although it is impossible to ultimately identify what went on inside the president's head, multiple sources for years have suggested military intervention was necessary. Therefore, a combination of personal and rational forces appears to have driven President Bush toward his final decision. Ultimately, one element is unmistakably clear, Americans, including the President, were infuriated. Whether these hot cognitions influenced the president's actions, however, may forever remain ambiguous. As some suggest, the determination that war was made before 9/11 and September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, simply provided the necessary rationale for an already necessary preemptive strike. In other words, politicians only saw what they wanted to see. Others believe that the war after September

11<sup>th</sup> was primarily based on indefinite, yet convincing evidence acquired at the time. Regardless of these converging opinions, forces invaded Afghanistan within two months.

### Impulsive Decision Making During High Stress Situations

To determine the degree of motivational bias Bush potentially endured, additional factors acting as a mediating variable in cognitive process must be explored. Although we may never reach a full understanding of Bush's internal thoughts, it is undeniable that stress within any administration plays factor and influences the psychological conceptualization of a problem. Although a great deal of the emotional connection to 9/11 has diminished over the years, in the immediate months after the attacks, many people, including members of the administration, associated themselves with the event on a personal level. Despite the potential for hot cognitive processing, however, the administration still could have acted rationally. Therefore, the question remains, to what degree, if any, did motivated bias and stress affect the administration's decisions?

### Hot Cognition and Motivated Bias

To assess this particular issue, it becomes exceptionally vital to understand the president's prior knowledge of Middle East affairs. If, in fact, his decisions were based on unmotivated, rational, cognitive processing, by definition he should be well informed on various social, cultural, ethnic, and historical facts. If not, some other underlying explanation other than

rational cognitive processing must elucidate the administration's decision making. This section, therefore, works to qualitatively assess whether motivated bias actually plays factor in the decision making process. If motivated bias is apparent, potential underlying cognitive processes driving Bush's decisions shall be illuminated and additional external factors affecting the administration's assessments shall be addressed.

When President Bush was considering war with Iraq, he consulted multiple foreign sources for information; however, his lack of sophisticated knowledge about the area was notable. According to Packer, the president was so incognizant about the state's social history, when Iraqi exiles approached the president, Bush did not fully understand the context of the information until the men explained well known social divisions present within the state's borders (2005, p. 96). Exiles such as Kanan Makiya and Ahmed Chalabi were said to have "wasted" one meeting with the president explaining how "the Iraqi population was divided between Kurds, Sunnis, and Shia" (Houghton, 2008, p.171). With this in mind, it may be reasonably concluded that the president did not make all administrative decisions based on educated rationale and substantiate evidence.

As elucidated by the evidence above, President Bush was considerably ill-informed on foreign policy. As a result, the president must have resorted to other cognitive mechanisms to make judgments. One potential mechanism used is based on hot cognition. As opposed to purely rational cold cognition, emotionally driven, hot cognitive processing has the potential to drive political behavior. While at times emotionally motivated decisions benefit the individual, decisions of this sort may also hinder an individual's assessment. The political pressure from the public as well as internal nationalism may have produced hot cognitions which encouraged

President Bush to strike in retaliation. Once troops were already deployed to Afghanistan, it may have made the decision easier to invade Iraq, because a sense of proximity was already reached.

Presumably motivated bias could have been used in a multitude of Bush's decisions because he lacked sufficient intelligence to make purely rational decisions. Bush desired simplicity in his administration, but perhaps simplicity was his greatest flaw. Lacking much needed background information about the social divisions within Iraqi society, as well as an arranged plan for the aftermath of America's War on Terror, the President limited his administration's ability to make effective decisions.

To further exemplify the naiveté of the administration's perception, the President and his administration were very surprised when they discovered the hostile Iraqi attitude toward American troops. Despite the "extent of opposition to Saddam, there was still growing resentment of the United States. Many Iraqis expressed bafflement at America's motivations, asking to see proof of President Bush's claim that Iraq is building weapons of mass destruction" (Whitelaw, 2002). Bush also neglected to properly assess the social divisions within the territory. Having little background of the divisions between the two factions, the Sunnis and Shi'ites, the president was more likely to make uninformed decisions which were not properly tailored for the area. Decisions were often made with haste. This increased the probability for strategies to lack effectiveness.

In defense of the president's apparent lack of familiarity with Iraqi foreign policy, it is illogical in itself to assume that any president, or person, always has adequate time to effectively utilize the analytic rationality model when making decisions. In many otherwise unmanageable circumstances, complexity reduction allows plans to appear feasible comprehensible.

Oftentimes, political actors must resort to cognitive shortcuts in order to reduce complexity, but when there is a significant lack or misunderstanding of information, hot cognitions may not allow for quality decision making. The informal style in which Bush made decisions additionally may have encouraged the administration's propensity to make choices based on impulse, therefore, overlooking plausible alternatives to a situation. Bush's emotional intelligence may have benefited him as a symbolic leader, but as a decision maker preparing to send troops half way around the world, hot cognitions and impulsive judgments on complex decisions were likely to benefit no one.

#### Stress and its Effects on Motivated Bias

High stress has the ability exasperate the decision making process. Organization within the Bush administration was lacking, and reliance on informal decisions seemed highly desirable. A lack of structure along with a plethora of national security breaches (the attacks by Al Qaeda on US soil) created a demanding working environment for White House officials. While some, like former President Richard Nixon, argue that crisis forces a decision maker to "discover all the latent strengths he never knew he had" others such as Alexander George contend that stress has the ability to dilute effective decisions (1962, p. xvi). George posts four major effects result from stressful situations: (1) diminished attention and perception, (2) augmented cognitive rigidity, (3) abridged and narrowed perspective, (4) redirecting blame on the opponent. These shall be the four main principles which determine the amount of cognitive bias present. If the presence of stress is apparent and influences the decision making process, then it would be reasonable to

determine that something other than mere cognitive rationality influenced the administration's decisions.

While political actors use some form of rational decision making, such as brainstorming multiple alternatives to a problem, stressful environments tend to act as a catalyst which inherently creates situations where emotions dictate the decision making processes (Gordon & Arian, 2001, p. 96). Rational thinking ultimately becomes convoluted in situations where stress looms. Pressure, as seen in a study conducted by Mann and Tan, potentially may stimulate paralyzing effects on stakeholders when compared to a control group. In the study, two groups were asked to produce possible alternatives for a given situation. One group was warned of time constraints and encouraged to hurry while the other was not. The group that did not experience verbal pressure (even when given equal time) gave more alternatives and inevitably considered to a greater extent the potential outcomes connected with various alternative strategies.

Given that many political figures experience some degree of stress, and due to the high stakes requirements of their job, reactions similar to the Mann and Tan experiment are likely. Elites, especially during times of war, must often make vital decisions in brief amounts of time and consequently may not consider all policy options—perhaps even posing fewer policy options in high stress situations. In President Bush's case, extreme stress mounted after a surprise attack on the nation occurred. Subsequently, he may have made irrational decisions based on time pressures and stress caused from the unanticipated event. After his final term in office, Bush disappeared from the media limelight, avoiding political interviews in general. The president's current public exposure is predominantly associated with his support of individual wounded soldiers.

Although it is difficult to determine, stress may have acted to impede rational cognition because it is likely to limit the amount of rational thinking a person experiences. Consequently, such stress may sway the political actions of representatives. As a result, the altered mindset is diluted to something other than pure rationality; thus, it may be concluded that motivated bias had a significant effect on many of the tenuous decisions made.

## Section 2: Cognitive Dissonance

During this particular section, it is imperative to keep in mind that intelligence is based on ambiguity. Potentially, the case against Iraq was mounted on extensive indefinite evidence presented by the intelligence communities. Due to this, Bush presumably could have based his opinions purely on evidence. In opposition, although an individual perceives something to be a particular reality, perception does not necessarily make it so. According to Cooper's *Fifty Years*, dissonance can be applied into a simplistic formula (Cooper, 2007, p.9):

$$\text{DISSONANCE} = \frac{\text{SUM (all discrepant cognitions} \times \text{importance)}}{\text{SUM (all consonant cognitions} \times \text{importance)}}$$

The administration may have looked for evidence which encouraged their ideals and beliefs.

Thus, this section determines which approach to cognition was used, and the degree in which cognitive filters, if any, influenced political behavior.

Although many scholars believe Osama bin Laden was located in Afghanistan, President George W. Bush entered into Iraq two years later under the assumption that Weapons of Mass Destruction were of global threat. Iraq gave US forces a 12,000 page declaration in December 2002 (before US invasion) stating it possessed no WMD programs (Richelson, 2003). Regardless



of the documents, scrutiny mounted. The US and British compelled Iraq to submit to UN weapons inspections. Iraq agreed to allow U.N. Monitoring, Verification, and Inspection Commission (UNMOVIC), along with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to conduct invasive assessments within the country on the condition that Iraqi officials accompanied the inspectors at all times (Woodward, 2004, p.239). When weapons inspections failed to produce any positive results, discontent collected within Washington. Even when no substantial evidence could be found solidifying the claims that such weapons actually existed, many political actors seemed unreasonably certain of their presence in Iraq. Political actors seemed so convinced they were willing to wage a war on it. America would engage in a *war* on terror in its quest for *peace* in the Middle East.

On March, 17<sup>th</sup> 2003, President George W. Bush addressed Saddam Hussein and the rest of the world:

“Over the years, U.N. weapons inspectors have been threatened by Iraqi officials, electronically bugged and systematically deceived. Peaceful efforts to disarm the Iraq regime have failed again and again because we are not dealing with peaceful men. Intelligence gathered by this and other governments leaves no doubt that the Iraq regime continues to possess and conceal some of the most lethal weapons ever devised. This regime has already used weapons of mass destruction against Iraq's neighbors and against Iraq's people... The danger is clear: Using chemical, biological or, one day, nuclear weapons obtained with the help of Iraq, the terrorists could fulfill their stated ambitions and kill thousands or hundreds of thousands of innocent people in our country or any other. The United States and other nations did nothing to deserve or invite this threat, but we will do everything to defeat it. Instead of drifting along toward tragedy, we will set a course toward safety... Before the day of horror can come, before it is too late to act, this danger will be removed” (Bush, 2003).

No single reason could be identified to invade Iraq. The potential threat of WMDs allowed for one strong and cohesive reason to justify an attack. Ultimately, it was one common factor which everyone in the bureaucracy could agree on. Although the country had a

longstanding reputation for aggressiveness it was not reason enough to wage a war. The threat of WMDs allowed for an appropriate attitude shift within the administration, consequently making preemptive action appear necessary and inexorable. Justification, however, does not necessarily equate to rational decision making.

Oftentimes, according to Festinger, cognitive elements do not truly parallel reality; consequently, *pressure* must exist for the individual to once again gain reassurance in their perception (Scott-Kakures, 2009, p. 78-79). Within the Bush administration, many of these manifestations existed. According to Sir Richard Dearlove, chief of Britain's MI6 "Bush wanted to remove Saddam, through military action, justified by the conjunction of terrorism and WMD. But intelligence and facts were being fixed around the policy" (Danner, 2006, p.88-89). In essence, the Bush administration along with Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, neglected to seriously assess factual documentation by internationally acclaimed inspection units and perhaps used questionable information gathered to pursue their own biased objectives.

Regardless of the less than factual evidence the leaders based opinions on, they truly seemed convinced. In a declassified document from the National Security Archive, Blair admits "In recent months, I have been increasingly alarmed by the evidence from inside Iraq that ... Saddam Hussein is continuing to develop WMD, and with them the ability to inflict real damage upon the region, and the stability of the world" ("Iraq's weapons of," 2002). But the evidence which alarmed Blair was ambiguous. Intelligence experts from the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence Research (INR) as well as the Department of Energy argued that the materials acquired by Iraq lacked strength for nuclear development. For example, it was very possible that the high strength aluminum tubes were unsuitable for uranium enrichment (Iraq, 2002). Both

Blair and Bush leaned on their alliance. This dependency could very well have created an environment where unbiased an evaluation of factual evidence became convoluted because the desire to maintain consistency was great. In opposition, with reliable sources such as the CIA producing various forms of evidence, some argue that the leaders potentially made decisions based on rational thinking. Regardless of these assertions, the reliance on WMD as an entrance into Iraq may not have been the wisest decision—but inevitably appeared to be one at the time. Although the administration claimed that they based their opinion on physical proof, there was no factual evidence to substantiate their assertions. As an end result, the administration effectively selected information which enhanced their own personal perspectives and neglected to rationally assess all the variables encompassing the situation.

### Cognitive Consistency

Rationalization occurs in a multitude of situations, and often, it does not harm anyone in any significant way. This process allows for individuals to displace discomforting evidence conflicting with already established beliefs. It is natural for people use mechanisms which justify obvious miscalculations, but when elite decision makers' blunders effect the entire planet, the humanly urge for conscience may harm thousands or millions of people. When reports and assessments by acclaimed international organizations produced no substantial evidence to prove the existence of WMD's, it was difficult for many conservative policy makers and followers to believe such information—especially when extensive time, money, and human life had been lost at the expense. Iraq was the America's first pre-emptive war; consequently, when the United

States found no form of WMD's the global community erupted with anger. The false rationale to engage in war left citizens bitter and enraged. As a mechanism to alleviate dissonance, believers of WMD's in Iraq turned to other theories to regain consonance.

According to the Iraq Survey Group's final report, Saddam did not have the current capability to launch any biological, chemical, or nuclear Weapons of Mass Destruction. Former Iraqi officials who worked with Saddam, however, acknowledged that the dictator wished to continue technological advancements in WMDs as soon as sanctions were lifted. Although the intentions were present, current evidence shows that Iraq did not have the resources necessary to create such weapons.

A popular theory encouraged by some members of the Bush administration, including Vice President Dick Cheney, characterized the movement and production of advanced biological weapons by rail and truck. In a UN report, Colin Powell reverberated firsthand accounts from an Iraqi chemical engineer who allegedly supervised one of the facilities. He claimed to be present at one of the sights in 1998, testifying that twelve of his colleagues died during an accident when biological contaminants leaked. Although UN inspectors found little physical evidence of functional mobile biological weaponry, the scientist's accounts were treated as reliable resources by officials. Figure 4 displays one of the images Colin Powell used at a UN meeting held on February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2003. It depicts the functionality of transportable biological weaponry according to accounts (Powell, 2003).



**Figure 4: U.S. Slide Show Presentation from U.N. Meeting**

As argued by the United States,

“Our conservative estimate is that Iraq today has a stockpile of between 100 and 500 tons of chemical weapons agent. That is enough agent to fill 16,000 battlefield rockets. Even the low end of 100 tons of agent would enable Saddam Hussein to cause mass casualties across more than 100 square miles of territory, an area nearly five times the size of Manhattan” (Powell, 2003).

In the administration’s defense, the uncovered development of weaponry found in Iraq was thought to only be “the tip of the iceberg” (Powell, 2003). Other forms of WMD, as America argued, could have potentially existed but remained uncovered.

Other weapons, such as nuclear weapons, were also deemed a threat by intelligence officials. According to reports, Saddam had already begun the advancement of nuclear

capabilities in the early 1990's and since then had never fully abandoned such developments (Powell, 2003). Saddam may have very well been seeking nuclear weapons; however, his advancements within the past decade were inadequate. Powell neglected to address that Saddam did not yet have to capability to enrich uranium, and therefore could not strike at Americans, or any country, with nuclear weapons. Despite the lack of evidence that successful Iraqi WMD's were operative, many officials regarded intelligence as a smoking gun and eventually forces expected to find some form of functional WMDs.

In 2000, no direct evidence could be found indicating that Iraq had continued its WMD programs; yet, two years later, American intelligence believed WMD production was once again in operation. Such audacious claims mounted as a result of many occurrences and one undeniable force was the attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. Iraq was believed to harbor Al Qaeda; thus, Saddam could potentially assist terrorist organizations by providing them with biological, chemical, or perhaps even nuclear weaponry.

White House officials and intelligence departments were under excessive pressure after the 9/11 attacks, and because the CIA had already failed to detect a terrorist attack killing thousands of American citizens, another successful attack on American soil was unacceptable. With regards to the intelligence community, such failure to accurately prevent the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks placed an enormous burden on all who neglected to properly assess relative information. Chief inspector, David Kay, led government intelligence efforts in Iraq and took much of the blame. (Kay, 1999). As he assessed, part of the problem rested on the extensive reliance to high tech gadgets. He expressed that human intelligence (which takes more time to

establish but is often more reliable) was not used as extensively as it once was. Kay and others assessed that information gathered from a distance may not adequately characterize the situation.

In addition, intelligence experts supposedly relied on speculative information to reach their conclusions about WMDs. Investigations about Saddam's weapons programs dating back to 1998 predominantly were based on unfounded information. Even scientists from the Arms Control & Non-Proliferation Advisory Board ACNAB concluded that the information gathered lacked hard, substantive evidence to confidently confirm all allegations. As concluded by the board, the CIA's "agency analysts' basic argument was: 'Saddam must be hiding something, or why would he be putting his people through all this?'" Indeed, there was such a substantial lack of solid evidence ACNAB members theorized that CIA members were blinded by some sort of Wizard of Oz illusion: "that the whole Iraq WMD program was smoke-and-mirrors, and Saddam was just a little guy behind a curtain" (Barry, 2004) Regardless of the ongoing arguments, ample evidence was available to the president. He and key members of the administration had access to varying sources with alternative beliefs. Most likely, the administration disregarded sources inconsistent with their own beliefs—inevitably resulting in flawed judgment. Consequently, blame shifted between members, departments of the administration, and the White House.

Bob Woodward describes in his book *Plan of Attack*, how the Bush administration bore an immense share of the criticism. Presumably, however, not one singular member was to blame for the fiasco. Bush blamed intelligence for making wrong conclusions about WMDs in Iraq, but as chief of the armed forces the president must be able to accurately assess all information given and make the best judgment call available at the time. Intelligence is rarely clear cut and undeniably factual, subsequently, before a preemptive war is sought the Commander in Chief

should have hard evidence proving that the situation is, in fact, urgent. Conversely, intelligence agencies should have relied less extensively on secondhand sources. Before the 9/11 attacks, Cheney already raised questions about the Middle East and its nuclear capabilities. After the terrorist attacks of 2000, however, the Vice President's concern intensified into an "obsession" (Woodward, 2004, p. 132). On a broad scale, groupthink was present because of the one-dimensional perspective dispersed throughout the administration. With groupthink present, the potential for cognitive consistency therefore was exponentially increased because there was a smaller chance for dissenters to successfully challenge the regime. The next unit focuses on the two main leaders dealing with dissonance—Vice President Cheney and President Bush.

#### Cognitive Dissonance: President Bush and Vice President Cheney

The fear of WMD's served as America's primary justification for attacking Iraq and removing Saddam Hussein from power. Therefore, when findings of WMD came up negative after the Iraqi occupation it not only upset the public, political leaders had a difficult time coping with the information as well. Many of the officials were so invested in their beliefs they almost appeared as to be stalling for time, believing that within a few more months, the weapons would be found. Other believers looked to Syria and made accusations that they were aiding Iraq by hiding weapons in their country. Just with basic knowledge of foreign relations, however, this would be very unlikely. Syria, having close relations with Iran, would be very unlikely to aid Iraq in missile concealment (considering this would tarnish the two state's relations). Specifically referencing Vice President Dick Cheney, the information acquired after invading Iraq blatantly went against his beliefs; therefore, to deal with the dissonance, he appeared to simply reject such findings. Later addressed are the president's beliefs and how the



administration and intelligence agencies potentially influenced his overall conceptualization of the situation in Iraq. As observed in both instances, some form of cognitive rationalization processing is most likely used.

### Vice President Dick Cheney

Under high pressure circumstances it is understandable that a political leader would want to maintain consonance. In Cheney's case, he openly articulates in interviews, talk shows, books, and newscasts his steadfast belief in the potential for Weapons of Mass Destruction to be very real. In an ABC interview from 2008, Cheney identified one singular mistake the United States made—Iraq did not have stockpiles of WMD *during* the 2003 invasion. The vice president then affirmed, "What they found was that Saddam Hussein still had the capability to produce weapons of mass destruction. He had the technology, he had the people, he had the basic feed stock"(Cheney,2008). Rather than admitting that the administration made a colossal mistake, Cheney had to go further and make these accusations. Consequently, in an effort to justify his actions, the vice president was unable to objectively correct any miscalculations. Instead, he resorted to other explanations to endorse his previous actions.

People such as David Kay, former chief nuclear weapons inspector for UNSCOM (1991-1992) and vice president of Science Applications International Corporations, help to enforce the belief in people like Cheney that a potential nuclear threat is imminent. In an interview conducted by PBS, Kay states "In the nuclear area, for example, it turned out [Iraq] had spent

over \$10 billion in the 1980s to develop a program that explored practically every known way to enrich uranium, and to craft a nuclear weapon.” He continues,

“And then, of course, Saddam survived, and it became quite clear early on into the inspections, that this individual had no intent of giving up, not only his nuclear program, but his biological, chemical and missile program. So you were dealing with an actively hostile regime that was determined to frustrate the international inspectors” (Kay, 1999).

Dating back as far as 1991, Saddam openly expressed wishes to “keep Iraq’s nuclear scientists fully employed. This theme of preserving personnel resources persisted throughout the sanctions period” (Central Intelligence Agency, 2004). Despite the information relating to Saddam’s intentions, there was no physical evidence proving that operable WMDs existed in 2004; but, for some, the realization that Saddam *once had* advanced capabilities over a decade ago increased potential doubt for the accuracy of the weapons inspectors—thus harboring suspicion for those who believed WMD capability existed in the Middle East.

Years after the initial Iraqi invasion, the former vice president has yet to accept any flaw in his judgment. Cheney’s memoir, *In My Time* defends his rationale for invading Iraq. In fact, according to a book review from *The New York Times*, Cheney’s and Rumsfeld’s memoirs both classified as “unusual for their defensiveness and occasional combativeness in the face of the broad popular contempt so many people expressed.” Both books share similar arguments in that political elites “rarely confess to making mistakes, though they often write sharply about others who have” (Brinkley, 2011). Reverting to blame others for their mistakes within the administration and asserting the overall plan effectively pursued an accurate objective is one way to expel any psychological discomfort. In this way, the predominant belief (the individual’s belief) is revitalized.

President George W. Bush

While Vice President Dick Cheney is often verbose about his beliefs of nuclear capability overseas, former President Bush deals with dissonance in a different manner. Unlike Cheney's relentless determination to justify that his beliefs were correct, Bush seemed to change his perception of reality in accordance with the new information.

Although it was not evident at first, Bush may have accepted the new intelligence, but the president dealt with the embarrassment and ridicule by shifting the blame elsewhere. According to *The Huffington Post*, Bush commented about how he felt when no WMDs were found after the Iraqi invasion

“I was not happy and I vowed to find out why the intelligence was wrong. And then to do something about it. Because one, I respect the intelligence communities. I've got great regard for the people who work at the CIA and I want to make sure the institution was credible because -- in the future -- because a president's going to have to rely upon the intelligence in order to continue to protect the United States. We've worked hard to strengthen the morale, the spirit and the foundation of our intelligence communities” (Bush, 2008).

Rather than admitting his neglect to more carefully assess intelligence and opinions presented by dissenters within the administration, the president shifts the blame to the intelligence community for lacking to provide him with accurate information.

Although an overwhelming amount of intelligence was manipulated by rumor and therefore distorted the perception of reality, a great deal of alternative intelligence supported the theory that WMDs were not present in Iraq. According to accounts from 1995, Iraq had destroyed all “weapons and agents” (Barry, 2004). A high-ranking scientist specializing in Iraq's

WMD program stepped forth to provide the United States with this information. Regardless of the defecting scientist's accounts, the elimination of many biological and chemical weapons remained unaccounted for (such as VX nerve agents and anthrax uncovered prior to the Gulf War), as a result, sanctions were not lifted under the rationale that Saddam had previously deceived American forces. Hussein Kamel (Saddam's son-in-law and chief of WMD programs) had also defected, surrendering "documents on imports and other transactions" (Woodward, 2004, p. 245). According to the accounts when "hundreds even thousands, of tons of chemicals or other raw material that the Iraqis said were for WMD production" were found weapons inspectors took advantage of the situation by destroying large quantities of material during their assessment (Woodward, 2004, p. 245-246). These accounts were systematically neglected and overlooked by the administration, and therefore streamlined thinking occurred as a result.

Additional efforts to provide alternative perspectives were scattered throughout various intelligence sources, and some individuals even approached the president with their ideas. Before the attacks on Iraq underwent, Brent Scowcroft, Bush 41's National Security Advisor, counseled Bush 43 in respect to Saddam. According to his accounts, Saddam's interests went against the United States, but he also added "There is scant evidence to tie Saddam to terrorist organizations, and even less to the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. Indeed, Saddam's goals have little in common with the terrorists who threaten us, and there is little incentive for him to make a common cause with them" (Woodward, 2004, p. 159). In this, Scowcroft warned Bush that other countries would not back him in his plan for war, ultimately making the task exceedingly more expensive and demanding. Bush's ultimate decision, however, went against such advice.

Doubters within the intelligence community voiced their opinions to the president; Bush, however, neglected to consider such information. An overwhelming assumption of the masses believed otherwise and inevitably, that was the path he chose.

### Section 3: Groupthink

A dominant and centralized perspective was being built in the capital; “for the first time in nearly eight decades, the Republican Party...won control of the White House, Senate, and House of Representatives in two consecutive elections” (Rothkopf, 2005). Despite the administration’s political monopoly, forces formed within the administration and restricted quality decision making. When George W. Bush took office, most scholars would agree that the president surrounded himself with brilliant minds that predominantly grew to share one common belief—war in the Middle East was inevitable. This overwhelming acceptance ultimately created an environment for a psychological distortion of reality otherwise known as groupthink to occur. Many White House officials with irrefutable experience believed Saddam Hussein possessed Weapons of Mass Destruction and potentially created pressure for the president to engage in war. Within the administration additional elements of groupthink are readily found: (a) *insulation of the group from outside* advice, (b) *aggressive and opinionated leadership*, (c) *lack of norms requiring methodical procedures*, (d) *high levels of stress*. The following paragraphs will discuss each subject to greater detail.

### Insulation of the group from outside advice:

One major problem linked to the Bush administration is that it was not only insulated from outside advice, some of the advice which should have been given was censored by the individuals Bush was closest to. For example, “neither Scowcroft, nor Bush senior wanted to injure the son’s self-confidence. So Scowcroft largely shut up in public, though he did not change his view.” Some of the most influential people, like the president’s father, had faced similar situations; yet, Bush 41 neglected to assist his son. He did not give his son ample information and vital opinions that may have saved the country not only an excess of 3.7 trillion dollars but countless American soldier’s lives (Cornwell, Ryan, Gering, MacInnis & Reich, 2011). In fear of damaging the President’s confidence, these individuals practiced self-censorship, which innately escalated the homogeneity of the group’s thinking.

### Aggressive and opinionated leadership:

In the decision to invade Iraq, voices other than the president’s were at the forefront of the argument. Most dominantly heard pushing the majority opinion was Vice President Dick Cheney. He arose as the governing voice which promoted the existence of WMDs in Iraq. But his influence would not have been as persuasive without cohorts. In congruence with the study conducted by Sloan, P. A., Berman, M. E., Zeigler-Hill, V., & Bullock, J. S., self –aggression is primarily linked to unanimous group cohesion. In other words, group members are more likely to act aggressively toward a dissenter when there is amity within the group (regardless whether the

dissenter voices his beliefs preemptively or after group norms have already been established) (2009, p. 546). In light of these studies, group norms within the Bush administration developed with one potent group norm, WMDs existed. Consequently, the potential for a strong group leader to develop as a mindguard (Cheney), and for a dissenter (Powell) to be aggressively attacked, remains consistent with the study. Even in recent evaluations, such as Cheney's memoir *In My Time*, the vice president has yet to let go of his aggressive streamlined thinking, and does not always place Powell in the most positive light.

Lack of norms requiring methodical procedures:

The president's methods were based around informality and simplicity. This structure, however, may not have been the best strategy for a president at the brink of war. In essence, a lack of structure may have created a social environment where the group was able to influence dissenters. Unconsciously, members might act on social cues consistent with the perceived group norm and, in effect, reflect the group's overall opinion without intending to. The group dynamic in the White House already had a structured hierarchy, with Cheney and Rumsfeld dictating their ideas. Consequently, dissenters within the administration were either disregarded or not taken seriously.

### High levels of stress:

High levels of stress internal and external to the administration also crippled decision making. As referenced in other sections, stress has the ability to negatively affect an individual's choice. Conversely, stress may also create an environment where the individual becomes motivated. Stress, therefore, may be seen as highly situational and as a result, it becomes difficult to assess its effects. There are specific examples where stress may have placed a burden on members within the administration, including the president himself. By 2006, some of Bush's closer friends made note that, "He looked tired, for the first time, which I hadn't seen before" (Stolberg). Along with this, members within the administration had been increasingly careful and perhaps overly sensitive to intelligence about terrorist activities in the Middle East. Government agencies had taken great heat from not anticipating terrorist attacks on American soil, and subsequently each agency remained hypersensitive so nothing in minute resemblance to 9/11 would ever occur again. Differences in opinions had also escalated tension within departments of administrative bodies. Combining all of these factors, personal levels of stress potentially increased to relatively high amounts. Not only could stress levels deteriorate the group dynamic for constructive policy options, stress may also allow for the development of mindguards.



## The Dissenter

If a group becomes overly cohesive dissenters who do not follow its streamlined beliefs may arise. Considering the absence of substantial evidence that WMDs existed and the lack of key diplomatic support, many heads within the White House were bound to collide. Juxtaposing ideas about the realness were debated—especially the juxtaposing ideals of Powell and Vice President Cheney. For quite some time since the Gulf War, Cheney became somewhat *obsessed* with the danger of WMDs in the Middle East. Powell and Cheney felt quite differently about how to approach foreign policy and possessed different views about Iraq’s danger potential. Differences between Rumsfeld and Powell also mounted. Although many instances capture tension between members of the administration, Woodward’s book, *Plan of Attack*, references one specific instance where the rigidity is palpable. On one particular night, the administration joined together and debated over the two factions of the Iranian government. According to Cheney, “The debate is whether it’s two sides of the same government or whether it’s two separate governments,” jokingly the vice president added “The same question applies to Don Rumsfeld and Colin Powell” (2004, p. 128-129). Both fundamentally disagreed on the necessity of using preemptive force. As Colin Powell asserted, he had built America’s reputation over several administrations and did not want its reputation tarnished. Powell had grown “exceedingly nervous” about the employment of military force based primarily off of theory.

Although Powell’s realist perspective was profoundly different from the president’s and others in the White House, he eventually would succumb to groupthink pressure. Powell would not change his opinion; rather, the Secretary of State would give up on his resistance against the administration. The turning point in Powell’s opposition to the administration appears to have

occurred during a meeting with President Bush in the oval office. During this meeting, Bush alluded to the importance of a unified team effort. He questioned Powell, “are you with me on this?” The diplomat responded “I’m with you Mr. President” (Woodward, 2006, p. 106).

According to Powell, “It would have been an unthinkable act of disloyalty to the president, to Powell’s own soldier’s code, to the United States military, and mostly to the several hundred thousand who would be going to war” if he were to go against his Commander in Chief’s wishes. Powell still desired diplomatic strategy, but there was no other option for him at this point. Extensive pressure for an extended duration of time was exerted on Powell to conform to the group’s preferences. Consequently, a combination of factors influenced the Secretary of State to act against all that he fought for over the decades as a diplomatic leader. He inevitably abandoned his personal opinions to work in unison with the group.

In the opposing perspective, the president did not make much effort to inform himself of multiple dissenting opinions when he could have used such material to his advantage. Powell had formed diplomatic relations with countries across the globe; however, his opinions were consistently disregarded by Bush. Although Bush believed he had created an environment where people were free to voice their opinions within the administration, this was not entirely factual. In retrospect, when the president was asked whether he met with Powell for his opinion on how to deal with Saddam Hussein, Bush replied “No” (Woodward, 2004, p. 251-252). The group dynamic at that point was obviously not as open to suggestion as the president once believed.

Once President Bush made up his mind, Powell decided to remain in the administration. Overall, Powell conformed to the pressures of groupthink. Although he had long resisted the attacks on Iraq, and rejected much of the policymaking by other members within the president’s

cabinet, the Secretary of State conformed potentially to protect his self-concept. Many perceived Powell as loyal, but he felt it would be of great disrespect to the Commander in Chief and to the US military if he were to oppose the administration once they had already reached a decision. The administration decided to engage in war. Powell would follow orders.

The president did not rely on Powell as much as he seemed to have relied on Cheney for information and personal perspectives. Nonetheless, President Bush needed Secretary Powell to present America's position on Iraq to the U.N. Unlike the other members of the cabinet, "Powell was conscious of his creditability and his reputation," members of the U.N. knew this and therefore would assess the American position with more seriousness (Woodward, 2004, p. 291).

#### Section 4:Self-justification:Rationalizing Away Presumable Flaws

At times, when obvious miscalculations have been made, an administration will do everything in their power to save the reputation of their political party. Even when a political figure realizes their mistakes, they do not always have the option to admit them. In this particular instance, it is possible that Bush realized his flaw in judgment long before he was able to openly admit it to the public and only used rationalization mechanisms to save face of his political party. Keeping in mind that some people internally are able to make rational decisions, but are not able to outwardly admit their flaws, the following paragraphs outline two situations where President Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney are confronted with information against their administration's former actions.

At the end of George W. Bush's first term in office, public popularity for the Iraq war was on the decline. Regardless of popularity, however, American military action was deemed necessary by the Republican Party. Encouraged by public outrage, Democrats jumped on the anti-war momentum in hopes of capturing public approval—especially when nearing a presidential election. In a 2004 presidential debate, Senator Kerry (D.) made accusations against President Bush, claiming he was insufficiently doing his job in the war overseas. Senator Kerry stated that President Bush was sending more troops to Iraq but ignoring the more important Al Qaeda problem in Afghanistan where Osama Bin Laden allegedly resided. President Bush's response was one the entire Republican Party used to its advantage. He turned Kerry's past support for the war back around on him. Bush answered,

“He [Kerry] also said in December of 2003 that anyone who doubts that the world is safer without Saddam Hussein does not have the judgment to be president. I agree with him. The world is better off without Saddam Hussein” (Bush, 2004).

In this one statement, Bush had effectively shifted the criticism away from himself and through self-justification and reassured Republican followers that the war overseas had made great accomplishments despite the fact that Osama Bin Laden had not been captured. The intrigue with this circumstance therefore lies not in the liberal accusations, but with President Bush's reaction to such accusations associated with his foreign policy. In this manner, George W. Bush won the argument for the masses based on his own personal charm and ability to justify his political decision. Even if it was not the right decision to invade Iraq, it became difficult to disagree that not only America but the world was better off without a tyrant like Saddam Hussein. Vice President Dick Cheney made similar remarks during an interview in 2011 with CNN's Wolf Blitzer “First of all, we got rid of one of the worst dictators in the world when he was tried and

convicted and ultimately executed. Secondly, when we went in, we have got the rudiments of a democracy now established in Iraq” (Cheney, 2011). Although these comments were made years apart they were nearly identical to one another—displaying extensive party cohesion and a united frame of mind.

In both instances, the President and Vice President used a very effective mechanism for defeating the opponent—they toiled with emotion. Just as Drew Westen observes in his book *The Political Brain*, people are predominantly influenced by emotion, even if we believe we are rational thinkers. In Westen’s opinion the Republican Party has mastered this technique and as a result dominates the political arena. When statistically examining income levels of the average American citizen, Democratic candidates should, in theory, win in a landslide every time. In contrast, America has seen its fair share of Republican representatives. Westen claims this is because Democrats lack adequate emotional appeal. In the previous example, Senator Kerry relied on factual evidence to appeal to his audience while President Bush and Vice President Cheney used emotional appeal.

When political actors make wrong decisions sometimes the best offense is a good defense—but good defenses are not always easy to create. Although the arguments Cheney and Bush make justify their rationale on a superficial level, many of their arguments are innately flawed. For example, in the same CNN interview with Blitzer, Cheney took another approach to justify America’s attack on Iraqi soil

“Right behind Afghanistan was Iraq. And we were convinced based upon Saddam Hussein's history, based on the fact that he had started two wars, based on the fact that he had violated 16 out of 17 national security –or U.N. Security Council resolutions, based on the fact that he had produced and used weapons of mass destruction against his own people—there were thousands of dead Kurds because Saddam Hussein had killed them with his WMD—that that was the target we had to be focused on if we were going to

avoid a situation which we were going to end up having to deal with a terrorist organization equipped with that deadly capabilities”(Cheney, 2011).

The masses had accepted that the war in Afghanistan was justifiable, but public criticism intensified during the war in Iraq. Eight years after the beginning of the war, Cheney still felt the burden to defend the administration’s decisions; yet, under his rationality, the United States should be at war with several other countries—North Korea, China, Cuba, Iran, Jordan, Palestine, Columbia, and multiple African nations—practically half the world.

During the time frame of the cases presented, it appears as though the political actors primarily made decisions based on passionate beliefs as opposed to formulating empty arguments. Even if the political actors internally changed their beliefs during their time in office, they could have used other more effective political techniques to save the administration’s reputation. Rather than hiding or justifying their flaws, as some scholars believed happened, perhaps admitting the truth and announcing alternative plans would have been a more effective political maneuver.

In the instances examined, it does not always benefit the public or other decision makers to hide the fact that the administration was wrong. It only skews the perception of what is factual and is questionable in the political realm. Even if a singular political figure changes his mind and internally takes a rational path, if he misleads the public and other decision makers, he therefore creates an environment where skewed perception inhibits further rational decision making. As it appears, however, the arguments presented were formulated to convince the public that the administration’s decisions were correct because the political leaders themselves believed in their actions at the time.

Since the existence of psychological exploration, self-serving bias has reoccurred time and time again, and these two cases are no exception. Where Truman would say “The buck stops here” Vice President Cheney and President Bush take a different approach. These political actors instead used self-justification to protect themselves from mistakes they had made. They blamed other departments and individuals for poor cooperation or poor intelligence (Mathew, 1951). Rather than admitting their flaws and changing course toward a more effective plan once the other failed (as a rational decision maker would do), these individuals clung tightly to their original beliefs. Thus, it may be determined that cognitive bias impaired the administration’s overall judgment.

## The Obama Administration

Presidential candidates may endeavor to change the country when running for office, yet on multiple occasions (perhaps close to all) candidates find themselves locked in promises which they are unable to keep. Obama is no exception. Although he made fantastic promises, perhaps that was the problem in its entirety. His promises were so grand they became almost impossible to satisfactorily fulfill. Obama did not necessarily make blatant mistakes, rather, he over anticipated. After George W. Bush left office, the incoming president anticipated that he in fact could change Washington and the world within four years.

President Bush bore much of the criticism when the housing bubble burst. Many US citizens were frustrated with the current economic climate, unsatisfied with war in the Middle East, and no promising solvent appeared viable with the current Republican administration. Senator Obama reassured America in his 2008 campaign, however, that *change* could occur in America. Yet, the fundamental question remains—how much change did occur in the past four years and was the change in right direction for the US economy?

President Obama and his administration are susceptible to cognitive miscalculations just like any other human being. Reality, therefore, is altered by psychological filters used in the interpretation of what policies will benefit the country. Psychological mechanisms used during policy creation will be the primary case studies examined. In particular, President Obama's choice in economic policy shall be qualitatively explored and discussed.

Due to the difficulty of obtaining information while a current administration remains in office, in addition to the inconclusiveness involving economic growth, resources for a qualitative



examination are limited in discussion of the Obama administration. Facts and information gathered therefore must allow for possible error due to the timeliness of the event.

Although Obama was relatively realistic in his predictions for economic development, he perhaps overshot the economy's recovery. Examination of the Obama administration shall be divided into several case studies. All of the case studies relate to various psychological theories. Within each section, different psychological filters which potentially obscure the president's and the administration's perception of reality are discussed in greater depth. This section will explore the following cognitive mechanisms used in decision making: (a) schema theory and its effects on the economic agenda, (b) cognitive consistency in relation to Obama's perception of the political climate, (c) behavioral economics, (d) and self-fulfilling prophesy.

In an expansive observation, the second half of this thesis will assess Obama and his decision making team. It is divided into specific case studies forming each section. The following sections are used to examine various cases where cognitive barriers influence the Obama administration.

### Section 1: Schema Theory

All political leaders have a tendency to relate similar situations when the current situation is ambiguous. Especially when decisions are rushed, such psychological advancements allowing humans to make complex decisions based off of little information are potentially as much of a blessing as a curse. In the first days of Obama's presidency, and before he was even sworn in to office, the politician intended to of bring America into a swift economic recovery based on a

Keynesian economic policy. However, as the coming 2012 election nears, perhaps the president had hoped for a more.

Section 1 discusses the historical influence on current economic policymaking and its effects on the development of particular schemas in President Obama's administration. First, current economic conditions are assessed. Once the current situation is accounted for, historical events dating back to 1929 and on shall be analyzed. Over a span of nearly a century, different perceptions of how to run the economic system have developed and some remained fairly consistent despite a changing global market. This particular study analyzes the extent to which the economic policy reflects current conditions. It shall be measured by the effectiveness of the policies [i.e. unemployment rates, poverty rates, and the balance of imports vs. exports]. Overall, economic policy in relation to psychology is a somewhat untouched field. Combined with the ambiguity of the event's timeliness, this particular case study on Obama is a relatively unexplored territory. The ultimate goal of section 1 is to determine whether Obama and his economic team used schema theory in their attempt to understand the complexity of the economic collapse.

As of February 2012, the Labor Department reported an unemployment rate of 8.3% lowered from its peak of 10% in 2009 (Shear, 2012). Many would argue, however, that the Obama administration has not fully risen to its promises. Although the economy is growing, it is doing so at a very slow pace. Multiple sources associate today's economic recovery to that of the stock market crash in the 1930's. For example, *The New York Times* stated on February 3, 2012 that "unemployment also remains higher than it has been for any presidential election since the Great Depression" (Shear, 2012). The Business section of *The Huffington Post* made similar

connections as well. An article from November 2011 started “The unemployment rate –stuck around 9 percent—is not as bad as that of the Great Depression, but in some respects the prognosis is equally grim”( Kuttner, 2011). Similarly, *The Washington Post* makes parallel accusations “A new CNN/Opinion Research poll shows that nearly half of Americans think a new Great Depression is likely to occur in the next year” (Blake & Cillizza, 2011). Preexisting knowledge about The Great Depression allows American journalists, politicians, and citizens to use what is known as mental economics. Using “general concepts, rules, lessons, and stereotypes,” Americans use their “generic collections of knowledge” in order to “categorize newly encountered information and to make inferences that go beyond the information given” (Houghton 2009, p. 121). Devastation during The Great Depression was much more traumatic than any later recession in the 80’s or 90’s; therefore, the event is more available for the human mind to use as a means of comparison. Vivid experiences which an individual is unlikely to forget—World War II, Vietnam, September 11<sup>th</sup>, The Great Depression, the first man on the moon—may all be argued as “cognitively available” historical events (Houghton 2009, p. 120). This availability heuristic, however, can potentially cause unreliable, skewed, and disproportional comparisons between events.

Similar to The Great Depression, the US government has recently resorted to stimulus in effort to reduce the economic recession. The theoretical background which spurred such development originated from theory developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although difficult to grasp even for top economists, the theory encompasses multiple facets related to unemployment. According to John Maynard Keynes’s theory “it is a mistake to imagine that full employment is part of the natural order of things, and that departures from it are abnormal and temporary

aberrations. On the contrary, full employment is only one of a number of possible situations.” (cited in Stewart, 1967, p. 103). When there are overwhelming levels of unemployment, the government may intervene either by distributing money directly by government spending, giving money to businesses, reducing taxes, or cutting interest rates to curtail the possibility of a further escalating economic downfall. Since 2007, three stimulus bills were enacted by both the Bush and Obama Administrations:

“a bipartisan \$158 billion package of tax cuts signed by President George W. Bush in early 2008, a \$787 billion bill pushed by President Obama as he took office in 2009 in the wake of the financial system’s collapse and a tax cut and unemployment fund extension agreement reached by Mr. Obama and Congressional Republicans in December 2010” (Douthat, 2012).

Despite this information, it remains difficult to decipher whether the stimulus has made a substantial impact on the US economy and whether or not alarms about stimulus spending ring true. Three overwhelming concerns arise from President Obama’s approach to rebuild America’s economy. First, a remarkably more complicated setting for rebooting an economy is present today because purchasing products overseas partially benefits other countries. Second, the president only controls 1/3 of the economic policy. Although such control provides the president and congress with much leverage, the two branches may not dictate the majority of economic strategy. Consequently, in addition to the fiscal policy the president enjoys, monetary policy must cooperate as well in order to propel an economy away from crisis. Third, the government’s control over stimulus money must be reassessed. Over the past few years millions of dollars in stimulus have either gone missing or have been wastefully spent by companies.

Rather than formulating an original plan to stimulate the US economy, Obama has relied heavily on the American past to provide the blueprint. Therefore, to understand the Obama

administration's mindset, it is inherently imperative to first analyze the impact of The Great Depression.

No matter the side of the political spectrum, anyone with minor economic knowledge would agree that poverty is adequately combatted through job growth. During the Great Depression "unemployment rose and wages fell for those who continued to work. The use of credit for the purchase of homes, cars, furniture and household appliances resulted in foreclosures and repossessions" (Taylor, 2008). People's faith in the economy and U.S. banks plummeted, resulting in an unemployment rate of 24.9% (Taylor, 2008). Such elevated unemployment frightened citizens—much like today. No one knew how long unemployment rates so high would continue.

According to Keynes, high unemployment levels could potentially persist in an economic environment. Unemployment "equilibrium" could theoretically endure for years "or indeed forever" (Stewart, 1967, p102-103). Obviously, this would not sit well with an impoverished American public. Jobs, therefore, were generated by Roosevelt for the lower and middle class by government imposition, otherwise known as the New Deal. In 1935, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) provided jobs across the nation to build America's infrastructure. By this time, a Keynesian approach to economics developed into something associable with liberal economic policy—where government intervention could be used to spur economic development. Roosevelt and congress effectively used such a Keynesian approach to stimulate the economy.

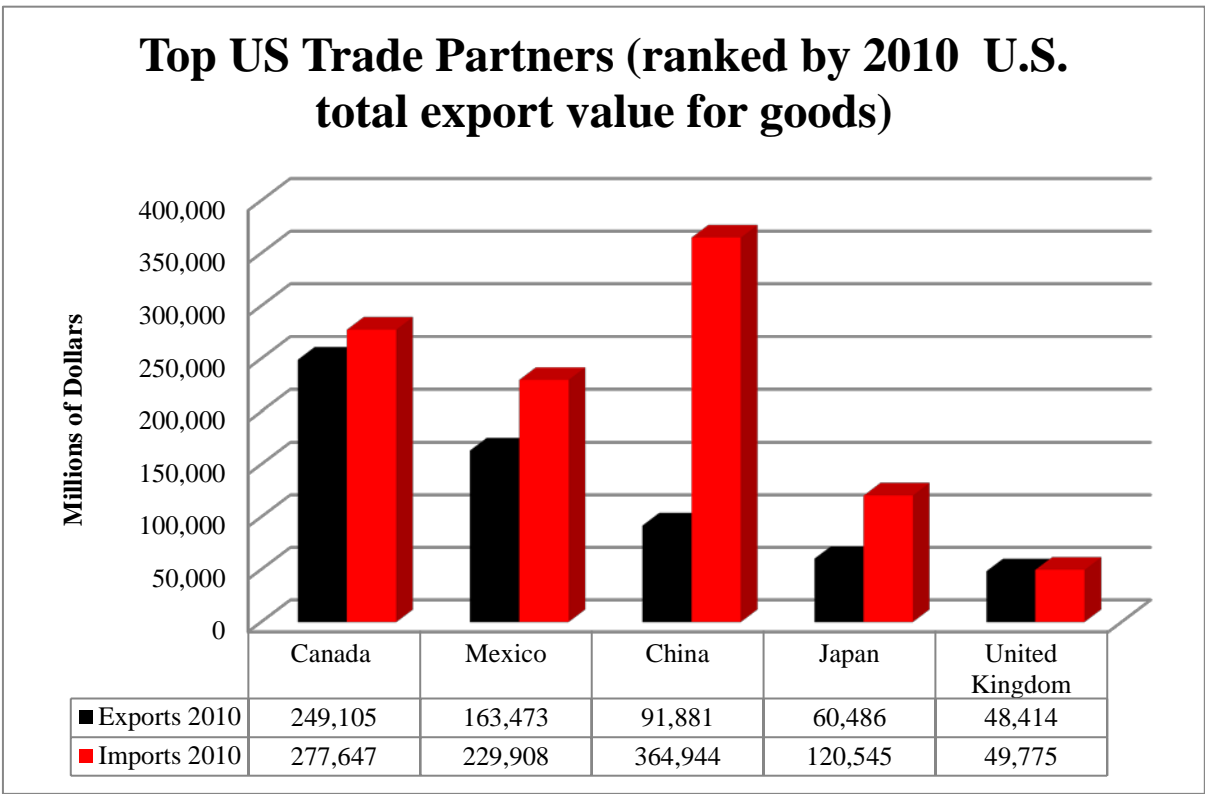
To alleviate recent economic trouble, Obama has promoted a similar stimulus plan, known as the American Jobs Act. President Obama's 2011 State of the Union Address captures his dependency on historical triumphs to create economic policy.

“Building this new energy future should be just one part of a broader agenda to repair America’s infrastructure. So much of America needs to be rebuilt. We’ve got crumbling roads and bridges. A power grid that wastes too much energy. An incomplete high-speed broadband network that prevents a small business owner in rural America from selling her products all over the world. During the Great Depression, America built the Hoover Dam and the Golden Gate Bridge. After World War II, we connected our States with a system of highways. Democratic and Republican administrations invested in great projects that benefited everybody, from the workers who built them to the businesses that still use them today” (Obama, 2012).

Many similarities unite both the current recession and The Great Depression of the 1930’s; conversely, several fundamental differences separate the two events as well. Although relying on past references of success as a template for present struggles is simple and effective, when the facts of an event are misconstrued or altered by a person’s perception, serious problems may arise. Categorizing two situations into one mental box is potentially detrimental because “political actors can and do make incorrect inferences by fitting individuals or events into the *wrong* categories or schemas based on purely superficial similarities” (Houghton, 2009, p.122). Although President Obama’s intentions may have been admirable, his overall perception potentially derived from President Roosevelt’s now outdated recovery plan.

Economic stimulation with taxpayer dollars during The Great Depression could effectively promote economic growth because the market was predominantly closed to foreign trade but with the expansion of global trade in today’s market, stimulus packages will no longer work as they used to. Cheap labor and minimal tariffs have encouraged overseas businesses to expand rapidly. According to CBS news, “over the last decade, big American firms have cut around 3 million jobs in the U.S. while adding almost as many overseas.” In accordance, the network stated “no company has gone global more aggressively than General Electric, the conglomerate that makes everything from refrigerators to MRI machines to jet engines” (Stahl,

2011). With such expansive overseas trade, stimulus benefits awarded to companies like GE spend money in places other than America. Table 1 displays America’s recent trade trends—the US spends more on imports in each of the top five countries it exports to (Top U.S. trade partners, 2012).



**Table 1: Global trade and its impact on the U.S. economy (imports and exports)**

A Commerce Department report from 2010 stated that “American businesses sold \$152.3 billion of goods and services overseas in May, \$3.5 billion more than in April.” Although this appears to be a positive trend, the U.S. also increased imports by “2.9 percent to \$194.5 billion”

(Schneider, 2010). Depending on global trade and spending roughly \$42.2 billion more on imports than exports allows for more stimulus money to be spent across the world rather than in the United States of America.

The global market initially boomed during the Roosevelt era. President Roosevelt and his economic advisors used the global market as a rescue tactic to induce monetary flow after global devastation. Although The Great Depression and the Second World War profoundly damaged America's economy and morale, it left European nations far more crippled. Adolf Hitler's forces paralyzed entire nations—killing millions and leaving many cities in ruins. America's mainland remained unscathed by the war and therefore the US emerged as the world's leading economic and political power. According to Kegley and Raymond in their book *The Global Future*,

“removing barriers to trade became a priority and led to the recurrent rounds of trade negotiations that produced remarkable reductions in tariff rates. As the US market was opened to foreign producers, other countries' economies grew, and rising trade contributed to a climate that encouraged others to open their markets as well” (2010, p.321).

In addition, a “shared system vocabulary” defining monetary policy and currency policy was created which allowed for fixed exchange rates and unified global trade (Kegley, Raymond, 2010, p.324). The Bretton Woods System thus encouraged a standardized approach to international trade and fortified the market enough to spread to new countries.

Around the same time, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), now known as the World Trade Organization (WTO), was established to create fair and cohesive trade agreements between countries. According to its official website, the WTO has seen “exceptional growth in world trade” over the “past 50 years.” As WTO representatives state, “Merchandise exports grew on average by 6% annually. Total trade in 2000 was 22-times the level of 1950.



GATT and the WTO have helped to create a strong and prosperous trading system contributing to unprecedented growth” (Lamy, 2009, p.3). Prior to and during Roosevelt’s presidency, such dependency on trade was inexistent; therefore, stimulus money would remain in the nation. Trying to stimulate an economy that presently conducts extensive trade, however, is just like trying to fill a punctured bucket with water, the more trade routes that open (or the more punctures in the bucket), the more opportunity there is for stimulus money (or water) to seep out.

Overall, Keynes had assumed a closed economy in his economic models. During the 1930’s, such global expansion was inexistent and so, he based no predictions on it. The way modern economics works, therefore completely diverges from traditional Keynesian economic thinking. But the economy does not function in such a way anymore. The economic realm can no longer be measured by consumption and investment internal to the country when much (if not most) investments are occurring outside the nation’s borders. According to Table 1 the American stimulus potentially stimulated the Chinese economy more so than the American economy because the cycle perpetuating the Keynesian system was broken. The fundamentals which fuel the economic system have changed—the economy runs on a different type of engine. Many economists, however, have yet to realize such changes and take appropriate action to alleviate disparity.

For almost half a century New Deal policy reigned supreme, then, as the presidential candidate explained “Ronald Reagan ushered in an era that reasserted the marketplace and freedom” (Leonhardt, 2008). Obama wished to complete the economic narrative. The thesis was formed during the Roosevelt Era, the antithesis during Ragan’s era, and now it was Obama’s duty to provide the American people with a synthesis (Schieber, 2011). President Obama did just

as he promised. He reaffirmed Keynesian ideology through government involvement within the marketplace. In this final synthesis, Obama wished to bring “the end of the era of unresponsive and inefficient government and short-term thinking in government, so that the government is laying the groundwork, the framework, the foundation for the market to operate effectively and for every single individual to be able to be connected with that market and to succeed in that market. And it’s now a global marketplace” (Leonhardt, 2008). Although this assertion sounds fantastic, the reality of the situation is that Roosevelt did not make perfect decisions either. The Federal National Mortgage Association, known as Fannie Mae, was established in 1938 by Roosevelt so homeowners could make second mortgages (Suskind, 2011, p.66-67). Second mortgages obtained through Fannie Mae, however, were one of the main reasons for the economic downfall of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Political elites, including Obama, tend to simulate past success—even if similar strategies did not work as planned in recent years. Especially when criticism is directed at an administration’s party, individuals tend to recall more positive than negative information. In a 1992 article from *The New York Times*, a general partner of Lazard Freres & Company said in an interview “With inflation seemingly under control, the new occupant of the White House announces a formidable \$30 billion program to stimulate the economy” (Rattner, 1992). Just as Jimmy Carter attempted to correct the economy, President Clinton along with President Obama used stimulus to cure the market’s anemia. Concerns in 1992 encompassed federal debt resulting from extensive stimulus packages. The same article from the early 90’s expressed how the debt was “two and a half times the level of the 1970’s and more than five times the rate of the 1960’s. While the fragility of the economy argues for not trying to shrink the deficit quickly (as Ross

Perot would do), longer-term reduction will be unattainable if we don't hold the line now” (Rattner, 1992). When President Clinton left office the federal debt limit was 6 trillion. Since then, it has increased an overwhelming 140 percent. Nevertheless, both parties resort to extensive stimulus which further increases the national debt (Cox, 2011). Obama’s economic tactics resulted in a flood of 800 billion dollars.

The question may arise as to why similar approaches continuously emerge in regard to economic policy. Similar perspectives as well as similar situations may all result in similar strategy, and Obama’s political team experienced both. The president promised a great deal of *change* in his 2008 campaign, but perhaps refurbished policies more accurately displayed his economic plan. Mike Froman, Harvard Graduate and former Chief of Staff to Treasury Secretary Robert Rubin during the Clinton administration, advised Obama early on with the selection of White House staff. In this decision, the president’s main objective was to acquire seasoned economists “practiced in the art of stanching financial crisis” (Scheiber, 2011, p. 9). Although his main objective was to gather expert economists, such elaborate resume requirements limited his choices ultimately to a “handful of Clinton alumni who had defused the global financial panics of the 1990s” (Scheiber, 2011, p. 9). The alliance of political economic advisors led to what many called the dream team, but one underlying fact remained, the dream team fixed the current economic problem the best way they knew how, with stimulus. In recollection, their previous measures seemed to work. Economic advisors carried the country out of a recession and left with two years, 1998 and 2000 in surplus. Nonetheless, the situation was starkly different, and a “Trust us, we’ve done this before” attitude would bring anything but *change* from the previous Clinton administration (Scheiber, 2011, p.xiii). Times were different— the housing market

remained stable, America was not engaged in any major wars, optimistic perspectives endured — and economists neglecting to adjust in accordance with the times potentially put the global market in grave danger.

Adding to his collection of political experts, Obama's Treasury Secretary and fundamental economic decision maker, Timothy Geithner, was a former advisor to President Bush. Geithner was one of the three economists whose influence led to the largely controversial 2008 bank bailouts. He too relates the economic downfall to The Great Depression

“The economy went through the worst crisis we had seen since the Great Depression. It was a shattering blow to the basic confidence of Americans and American business. It's going to take some time for people to be more confident that it is definitively behind them and make them believe that they can take a risk again on the strength of the American economy” ( Scheiber, 2011, p. 66-69)

Similar comments may derive from similar schemas, and even top economic advisors may be led astray by superficial similarities, ultimately misguiding policymakers. Obama may have approached the economic downfall with different vocabulary, perhaps even with slightly different tactics; however, the underlying energy which fueled the economic engine was tax cuts and stimulus—something everyone has seen before.

Stimulus may not even have been the best or only solution to the problem, but because it was used and worked effectively before, it was the most trusted method to perk an anemic recovery and raise unemployment levels. Although the financial sector was the initial force driving global panic, it still was provided with government resources. Some investors used that money to their own personal gain, pocketing it, instead of the country's overall gain.

Since 1977, every Democratic president has enacted some sort of stimulus to revive the economy; conversely, not one stimulus package has convinced the nation of its effectiveness as

Roosevelt's stimulus plan did in the 1930's and 1940's. Make no assumption that this thesis aims to downplay the complexity of the economic realm; rather, it works to better understand such complexities and potential psychological threats that impede constructive policymaking. Consequently, it is a viable presumption that economic stimulus may have exhausted its effectiveness in today's global market, and even though political elites along with the media cling to such comparisons, they often only remain as superficial associations unable to constructively assist US citizens and policymakers.

## Section 2: Cognitive Dissonance and the Effects of an Economic Downfall

Poverty is only one factor in a plethora of empirical research which enables economists to analyze the market and economic stability; however, it still carries much weight as an investigative mechanism. Therefore, the degree of cognitive dissonance may be assessed by it. Although Obama chose a path not entirely manipulated by the desire for cognitive consistency, it appears as though he was influenced by it. When his lack of progress is made apparent, he resorts to defensive mechanisms in order to protect his self-esteem and credibility as a leader. Many Republicans view Obama's bailout as a colossal mistake and, similar to the Marian Keetch example, many Democrats solidified in their support of the president after the economy lacked to show substantial improvement. Consequently, we may observe both presidents under different circumstances, with different administrations, ideologies, and backgrounds; but, regardless of their differences, all individuals making decisions deal with cognitive dissonance on a regular basis. Each individual has the choice and obligation to either accept new information as true or

disregard it as false. Problems only occur when an individual remains consistent with his or her own belief in spite of new information. Remaining inflexible to opinion change when the circumstances obviously point to a leader's mistake is when cognitive dissonance becomes most disheartening. As a result of a leader's dissonance, rationalizing defense mechanisms may have an adverse effect on the rest of the country and potentially the world.

One way to examine the state of the economy is through poverty rates. Poverty is linked to multiple facets of failure within a society—the failure to achieve higher living standards, the failure to produce a stable environment for economic growth, the failure to adequately provide education to citizens—and because this social problem is so complex, potential solutions also become convoluted and contested amongst political parties. Conservatives approach poverty with a trickle-down effect, while liberals approach it with a trickle-up ideology. Both appeal to the margins, but the real question is which one will ease poverty in America?

With more people out of work, more are consequently impoverished. In March 2011, the Congressional Budget Office projection stated “the child-poverty rate would soon hit 25 percent” across the nation. Poverty is strongly interconnected with economic health, an epidemic which Obama attempted to cure. Consequently, his failure to admonish economic instability links to constituents' (especially Republican constituents) disapproval. Although President Obama cannot ignore such statistical evidence and agrees times are tough, he also justifies his job as president by openly arguing that the economy could have been a lot worse—although there are no reliable, measurable means to indicate if the economy would be worse off today if the stimulus package was not introduced. Just as President Bush used self-justification, it appears as

though Obama tried to convince himself and his followers of his effectiveness as president by attempting to deflect failure with rationalization.

Although poverty is often compared with economic instability, and poverty rates are high within America, it does not necessarily mean Obama has completely failed at his attempt to recover the economy. Much evidence shows administrative success. One triumph in particular is the auto industry bailout. Although its popularity is divided amongst many partisans, strength in the market has slowly increased. According to CBS news correspondent Dean Reynolds “On the surface, the U.S. auto industry appears to have turned a corner. Ford is thriving. Chrysler and General Motors are out of bankruptcy and showing off lines of popular new models since being bailed out by the federal government” (Reynolds, 2011). In regards to this information, the auto industry has yet to face many obstacles. Rising prices of gasoline and alternative forms of energy may hurt the industry once more if it neglects to advance. Therefore, to some degree, the auto bailout’s success may only be a temporary means of maintaining the status quo. Amongst a shaky recovery; however, the auto bailout worked. In fact, it is one positive aspect the Obama team will stress in the 2012 presidential election.

Obama and his administration may face various forms of cognitive dissonance, but their self-image is once again revitalized by successes— such as the success of the auto bailout. The following section characterizes more about how the Obama team works to create consonance not only for themselves but for their followers.

## Cognitive Consistency Theory

Adjustment to an individual's, group's, or party's mindset, usually takes time or is resistant to change. In relation to schema theory, where the observer makes decisions based on their "generic collections of knowledge," cognitive consistency theory works to maintain a person's self-image and personal opinions or values (Houghton, 2009, 121). Although this is a tentative case study due to the lack of information on the subject, evidence thus far suggests that cognitive consistency has played a factor in the president's ultimate conceptualization of the economy. Even when the economy seems to stagger in growth, Obama is able to maintain a consistent image of progress in the nation. Rather than making a blatant mistake, Obama may have overreached on his expectations. Tavris and Aronson state in their book *Mistakes Were Made (but not by me)* "Depending on which side of the wall we are on, we systematically distort our memories and account of the event to produce the maximum consonance between what happened and how we see ourselves" (2007, p. 193). Obama had grand plans for America's economic stimulus, healthcare reform, and financial reform, but perhaps he had taken on too much, and therefore set unrealistic goals for himself. Although Obama appears mindful that much work in the market has yet to be done, with an upcoming election, it would be beneficial to him if the economic climate were a few degrees warmer. Also, it must be considered that Obama expected to see more improvement after four years.

All three economic downfalls during the Carter, Clinton, and Obama administrations were caused by different shortcomings within the market; yet one remedy (economic stimulus) was used to treat them all. Previous Keynesian approaches at economic policy that failed to



appropriately stimulate the economy should have acted as a warning to President Obama—perhaps even making him reassess the fundamental effectiveness of economic stimulus.

Monetary and fiscal policy are also vital to the recovery of the American economy and, to an extent, the importance of monetary policy is neglected by the executive branch. As described by the Federal Reserve, one of its many jobs is to “[Conduct] the nation's monetary policy by influencing money and credit conditions in the economy in pursuit of full employment and stable prices” (“Board of governors,” 2011). Along with the Central Bank, these two institutions successfully hold extreme power over the economy. As stated in an article from *The New York Times*,

“It used all its traditional tools and many new ones to prop up the financial system after the Wall Street meltdown of 2008 and gave the economy unprecedented forms of support during the recession and weak recovery that followed” (Mallin, 2012).

The Federal Reserve and Central Bank operate independently from executive control and due to such autonomy, their place in the national and global market is invaluable. Although the president may not have executive power over either institution, he does have the ability to motivate the public and members of congress. Encouraging alternative plans to revitalize spending is something Obama could have done during his first term in office. For instance, in addition to the American Jobs Act already in place he could provide incentives for credit card companies to start loaning again.

Since Obama has taken office, no significant effort was made to free up credit and loans by banks. Rather than singularly resorting to bailouts, the president and congress could have encouraged loans. Although interest rates are low, banks till this day are not spending as they once were. At one time almost anyone had access to credit and mortgages, but currently people

have limited access to different types of lending. Although encouraging spending once again through stimulus in loans would potentially spur the economy, Treasury Secretary Timothy Geithner favored the status quo which discouraged such ideas.

As a final consideration, taxpayer money given to corporations should be strictly monitored by the government. As a result of inadequate surveillance, millions of dollars have either gone missing or have been wasted. An article from *USA today*, for example, stated how

“Recovery.gov promised transparency on how the government spends every dollar of stimulus money, but there's \$162 million the website doesn't disclose. Recipients of 352 federal stimulus contracts, grants and loans have failed to report how they spent the money, the status of their projects or how many jobs were funded, according to the Office of Management and Budget ” (Korte, 2010).

Large amounts of tax payer money have gone missing, and little restrictions placed on stimulus spending have resulted in the deception and misuse of federal funds. In retrospect, many economists agreed to this. As one top official stated, “We should have spent more time thinking about the money being spent, rather than simply that there was this hole of a certain size in the economy that needed to be filled...How each dollar is spent is as important as the gross number” (Suskind, 2011, p. 162-163). The area that benefited most from the stimulus was the financial sector; in fact, it was the only segment of the economy that “resembled its former self...where the traders and bankers were approaching their precrisis-level bonuses” after the economic downturn (Schieber, 2011, p. xii). An *ABC News* article also raised serious doubts about how stimulus money was being spent.

“In Arizona's 15th congressional district, 30 jobs have been saved or created with just \$761,420 in federal stimulus spending. At least that's what the Web site set up by the Obama administration to track the \$787 billion stimulus says. There's one problem, though: There is no 15th congressional district in Arizona; the state has only eight districts” (Karl, 2009)

The locale of these taxpayer dollars is somewhat a mystery, but one explanation covers all speculation—taxpayer dollars are not being used by businesses (and possibly government officials) with the original purpose which they were intended for. Overall, the president did not fully assess all aspects of the situation, and therefore overestimated his ability to solve the current economic problem. In essence, the president and his economists neglected to fully conceptualize each potential outcome, neglected to take bold action (which will be discussed in the next section), and consequently, limited the stimulus’s power.

### Section 3: Groupthink and its Influences on the Economic Recovery

Groupthink has the potential to affect the group dynamic in any situation where similar minds converge. In the case of Obama and his political economics advisors, many were from the establishment and already had the experience to act confidently in the wake of a global crisis. Regardless of their certainty, none of the advisors had experienced a situation quite like the economic recession of the present day. Economic “stagflation” during the Carter administration and recession during the Clinton administration were far less impactful on the nation and resulted in far less domestic poverty and unemployment. Although evidence is yet uncertain due to its timeliness, and potentially may change in light of new information, the possibility is raised that groupthink did in fact occur within Obama’s economic team. This chapter will be divided into several sections which encompass specific elements of groupthink: (a) *insulation of the group from outside advice*, (b) *a lack of norms requiring methodical procedures*,

(c) *homogeneity of members' backgrounds/ideology*, (d) *high levels of stress*. Even if Obama's recovery plan is working, elements in the latter potentially characterize why the economy has been so slow growing.

Insulation of the group from outside advice:

As previously noted, Obama's economic advisors were not eclectically selected because of their originality; rather, they were selected more by their résumé. Robert Rubin and Lawrence Summers, for example, were from the Clinton administration. There were multiple rationales for this selection process. First, Obama wanted qualified advisors who had experienced similar conditions while working in government decision making arenas. Secondly, it is quite common for a presidential nominee to turn to "party eminences in a crisis, if only to reassure the anxious public that he is receiving the best counsel" (Scheiber, 2011, p. 6). When past government members return with an already established mindset, the potential for them to view the situation with a similar perspective becomes very high. In this manner, the overconfidence in their ability and the administration's overconfidence in the group may lead to group insulation because no one other than the already established group is left to question the credibility in their proposed ideas.

In addition, members of the economic team are appointed by the president and approved by congress; therefore, they do not face the same levels of direct public pressure in the way an elected official would. Not only was Obama able to choose relatively like-minded individuals, the individuals selected were not necessarily the type of people the American public would

choose in an open election. Although there is no argument for the implementation of this type of procedure, the existence of appointments by the president often encourages groupthink, and thus group insulation. This occurs because group members are often chosen by one individual.

A lack of norms requiring methodical procedures:

The way the Obama administration attacked various forms of policy at one singular time can be compared to too little butter over too much toast. If there is a lack of butter (or manpower) in Washington, no policy will adequately cover all Americans (or toast). With this in mind, the Obama administration may not be reprimanded for its lack of trying, but perhaps may be criticized because it dipped its hand into too many jars at one time. For Obama, the economy was but a slim slice from his political agenda. Being remembered as the man who prevented a second Great Depression was not enough. Rather than approaching each of his reforms separately, Obama came into the White House with a variety of expectations. He had ambitiously envisioned multiple achievements to mark his presidency from “health care for every American; to ending global warming; to solving the ‘problems that George Bush made far worse, but had festered long before George Bush ever took office’” (Scheiber, 2011, p. 13). Obama wished to fix all of these problems, but how would all of this get done? Four years is often too little time to make the amount of changes the president intended, thus it is reasonable that the president was pressed to make radical change at once and perhaps he should have focused on one resolution at a time rather than a combination of multifarious changes all at once. All of the president’s goals are potentially feasible, but they are too much to swallow in one bite.

Ultimately, Obama did inherit the greatest economic emergency since The Great Depression and could not afford to set aside this primary goal for other side objectives. Although it is difficult to assess the degree, most scholars would concur that the president and his administration would inevitably lack the potency in one area because they spread themselves too thin.

Homogeneity of members' backgrounds/ideology:

One common mistake is the perception that the team of rivals extended to Obama's economic team. Rather than being innovative on economic policy, the team of rivals was used to describe foreign policy. The common misperception derives from Hillary Clinton's appointment as Secretary of State. Although it may have appeared as so, Obama was not *new* on economic policy. In fact, many were surprised in Obama's choice of the economic administrative body because it consisted of many bureaucrats from past administrations. As previously stated, Rubin and Summers were originally from the Clinton administration. The president's logic in his selection was reasonable, he wanted seasoned advisors who knew the administration and how it operated. It became imperative for the president, who many believed was too inexperienced, to surround himself with qualified individuals. Through this assertion, groupthink was much more likely to propagate because of the dynamic amongst similar individuals with transecting backgrounds.

Although Obama picked experienced members, the administration has yet to make any substantive reforms. Some of his economic advisors wished to spend more, but for one reason or

another, lacked the boldness to promote their beliefs. According to Christina Romer, a Professor of Economics at the University of California at Berkeley, “you had to go all the way up to an eye-popping 1.8 trillion to fill the entire hole in the economy—the ‘output gap,’ in economist speak”(Scheiber, 2011, p.27). According to accounts, however, Summers’s would later reduce this number to 1.2 trillion. This creates the possibility that a mindguard (or multiple mindguards) influenced the administrative decisions, and ultimately reduced the Obama team’s impudence.

Due to individuals, such as Summers and Geithner, with conservative Clintonian views, the economic team may have veered more toward the right than previously expected or intended. Although this evidence remains inconclusive as of yet, it appears as though a New Democrat ideology held a greater portion of the power as compared to liberal leaning members within the economic team. Robert Reich, for example, remains conspicuously silent during much of the decision making. Through these observations, the question ascends whether or not Reich was pressured to remain silent by other members of the group. Additionally, many questions were raised as to why no one seriously considered Romer’s economic plan. As some scholars believe, Geithner was partially the reason for idea suppression within the group. Currently, Mr. Geithner is the only member of the original economic team “who has outlasted every other member of the original inner circle” (The New York, 2011). As the most senior member, his experience potentially may pressure other members towards his ideology. His leadership in the past disallowed radical proposals; and therefore, may continue today.

Overall, homogeneity within the group may have discouraged the economic team to ask for large amounts of money. Instead, the team would request only what they anticipated to get

passed by congress—\$800 billion. While this is still a large amount of money, we never shall know whether other plans or amounts of stimulus would have worked more effectively.

In light of the fact that these predictions are premature, a segment will not be devoted specifically to mindguards within this section. Rather, the possibility of mindguards is introduced (as in the above) and describes what has been observed thus far. Perhaps projections, such as those provided by Romer, would have decreased the unemployment rate. In regard to these disagreements, Obama takes responsibility for the mismanagement of his economic team.

#### High levels of stress:

During any presidency, high levels of stress are sure to arise, and with the broad political agenda and the market at the brink of an economic free for all, stress levels presumably had increased for many high ranking decision makers. As Obama confessed to Geithner during his transition into the presidency, he was going to “‘Change the trajectory of America...’ but he was not going to junk the rest of rest of the agenda” (Scheiber, 2011, p.21). The work environment for Obama and his advisors, therefore, was overwhelming—increasing stress levels and the potential for mistakes to be made.



#### Section 4: Behavioral Economics

Combining both psychological and behavioral insight, behavioral economics rids the current acceptance of the Economic Man and combines emotional factors with economic decision making to better understand why humans make particular decisions. Working complimentary with Herbert Simon's bounded rationality theory, which argues that man does not only think rationally when making decisions, behavioral economics explores the psychological impact man encounters when emotion overlaps economics. As Craig Lambert, a journalist of Harvard Magazine, wrote

“Like all revolutions in thought, this one began with anomalies, strange facts, odd observations that the prevailing wisdom could not explain. Casino gamblers, for instance, are willing to keep betting even while expecting to lose. People say they want to save for retirement, eat better, start exercising, quit smoking—and they mean it—but they do no such things. Victims who feel they've been treated poorly exact their revenge, though doing so hurts their own interests” (2006).

Rather than robotically making decisions on a quest to maximize profit, behavioral economics strikes against classical and neoclassical fundamentals. Such divergent, yet innovative thinking allows for a critical analysis of the emotionally driven economic decisions political leaders make while conducting domestic and foreign economic policy.

Cognitions reflecting economics, however, are not necessarily ill-intended. Smokers, for example, do not wish harm upon themselves, but cannot rid themselves of their addiction. Like the smoker, American politicians are hard strung to change their ways and mindsets—including in economics. Commonly, individuals feel the same way about the consumption of goods. According to Ran Kivetz, Professor of Marketing at Columbia Business School, “splurging isn't the only kind of self-control problem afflicting us when we go shopping” (Tierney, 2009). He

continues on, and states how individuals may have a bad case of buyer's remorse, but the greatest regret people are left with relates to "what we didn't buy." They "think wistfully of the pleasures we passed up" (Tierney, 2009). This may not be so far off in relation to political spending in Washington.

Our deficit may have exploded to such a large amount because of this very reason—the government (during the Bush and Obama administrations) was fearful that they would regret *not* spending in certain areas. Consequently, Bush operated with his Vice President under the assumption that "deficits don't matter," while Obama operated with an ideology pushing more government spending (Talton, 2010). Obama believed stimulus paid for by American tax dollars would cure the economy.

If President Obama and his economic advisors were purely rational decision makers, then it would be plausible to assume that they weighed every possible solution to fix the economy; however, time constraints, congressional pressures, and public pressure all build and force leaders at times to make sudden decisions—especially when disaster is on the brink of eruption. Consequently, it is probable that political decision makers will make decisions where repercussions are not thoroughly thought through.

### Self-fulfilling Prophecy and Decision Making Influences

Where macroeconomics and psychology overlap, a plethora of new material is open for exploration. This case study will examine the presence of self-fulfilling prophecy in the market—how personal opinions, perceptions, and misperceptions create the potential for a view of reality

to actually come true. As Keynes believed, the Great Depression occurred from mass speculation among investors. As the economic climate soured, investors began making bank runs, which in turn created a contraction of deposits. With more currency in the hands of the public, the money supply sharply decreased, frightening more investors and spiraling the marketplace downward.

If the people in 1929 had enough confidence to spend and continued to invest their money in the economy, as opposed to transferring their lifesavings from their bank accounts to under their mattresses, then the economic catastrophe resulting in an all-time high of 25% unemployed would never have occurred. Although unrealistic, one example accurately portrays this presumption. If the marketplace were on the brink of collapse, technically, if someone were to brainwash the entire public that conditions were optimum to start spending again, a self-fulfilling prophesy would occur. Increased consumer spending would result in more demand for goods and services, thus spurring job growth. Theoretically, half the battle in market stability rests in the individual's mind.

In a volatile market, however, would Obama be able to create a self-fulfilling prophesy if he announced improvement in the economy greater than actually projected? Perhaps the true answer is unclear at this point in history. Regardless of these theories, Obama utilized the importance of his position to encourage job growth and economic stability. Amidst his attempts to encourage investors' morale, the timing of the president's inauguration simply did not coincide with the bottom of the recession. Obama took office "with the economy spiraling downwards...before the average voter grasped the steepness of the drop" (Scheiber, 2011,

p.136). Public perception was that Obama had the ability to fix the economic mess, but in reality a president (Republican or Democrat) has only so much economic power.

According to economist Roger Farmer, two mysteries rest at the core of monetary theory: (1) “why a piece of paper that has no intrinsic value can come to be exchanged for commodities that yield utility” (2) “why apparently identical pieces of paper that have identical risk characteristics can trade at different prices” (1999, p.231). Both may be explained through a mixture of theory and math, but the final underlying factor allowing the monetary system to work rests in psychology.

Although federal debt has increased throughout US history, failure to increase federal debt when necessary would likely result in lowered confidence among investors. The US dollar, a note of legal tender for all public and private debts, ultimately it bases its value on the stability of its credit. If faith or favorability in the currency lost the note will lose value.

Economics results from an interweaving of personal perceptions and the willingness to take some level of risk, therefore, when the perception of risk is heightened, the likelihood of economic growth decreases. In this manner, public policy may only make a limited amount of impact because the perception of the market is assessed inside the minds of investors.

A stable market only remains unwavering if public perception of the currency remains consistent. In all technicalities, faith in the US dollar, however unlikely, could plummet or skyrocket overnight. The market’s susceptibility to change is therefore its greatest strength and weakness, and ultimately is altered by public perception.

Presidents, such as Obama, have the ability to alter this perception. But how may this be done? Positive encouragement amongst both political parties for this common cause would most

likely encourage job growth, however, is unlikely to happen. With parties growing increasingly more polarized, more criticism, and therefore more skepticism, lingers in Washington. Without citizen's trust, the illusion of stability is lost, therefore, discouraging growth during difficult economic times.

Monetary supply and demand holds great influence in the country's economic stability and in this sector, the president yields little power. With only 1/3 of the power left to an often divided congress and president, much of the policy becomes diluted. Therefore, the magnitude of decision making is left for the Federal Reserve and the market to decide.

## Conclusion

The Obama and Bush administrations fell into very different categories of thinking and ultimately made dissimilar decisions that impacted the country and world. Despite their differences, the two administrations had succumbed to cognitive miscalculations leading them to veer on trajectories which were not the original objectives their administrations endorsed. Despite the fact that it is impossible to completely understand another's inward thoughts, the political actions carried out by the administrations and their rationale behind such actions presents strong evidence to suggest a relationship between objective reality and the subsequent political behavior. The behavior consequently derives from the biased perception of a particular reality.

Although psychological influences were not presumed present until verified as highly plausible, each case study observed exhibited some degree of psychological filtering which manipulated the perception of objective reality. As observed, psychological filters such as cognitive dissonance, cognitive consistency, groupthink, schema theory, and self-justification all played factor in both administration's overall perception of the political atmosphere. Through means of various sources such as transcripts, memoirs, books presenting first and second hand accounts, news articles, and academic journals, the political actors' outward behaviors were accounted for and used as observable material for the dependent variable. In essence, the two administrations are more alike than dissimilar because they are comprised of boundedly rational individuals.

Rational thought process, in some instances, may be argued; however, vast quantities of evidence suggested otherwise. President Bush initially entered into Afghanistan without the

ultimatum of entering into Iraq, while President Obama's public emphasis on the economy radically shifted to talks about healthcare. In order to protect their initial perceptions of the world and how they were going to run it, the presidents used different psychological filters along with variations of groupthink to reaffirm consonance in their lives. Therefore, this thesis concludes that there is a strong relationship between objective reality, psychological filtration, and a political decision maker's outward behavior in all cases. While the impact of cognitive theory varies by degree, it is highly likely that all psychological mechanisms, in fact, were present and to some degree guided decisions.

The possibility also arises that the political figures observed changed their minds or engaged in rational decision making. Oftentimes, political leaders may come to the realization of such mistakes and change their trajectories; however, are unable to address the public for various political reasons. If this occurred, it becomes very difficult to identify where and why. In most cases, the impression remains that these political figures neglect to alter their belief system in the presence of new information inconsistent with their belief. Additionally, the possibility arises that the researcher is biased. Although much evidence was used to substantiate claims, cognitive theory bias has the ability to affect the researcher just as it affects any other human being.

With the past two administrations, no definite paper trail has been left for political scientists to observe. Therefore, it becomes increasingly difficult for observers to analyze political action and decision making strategy. Historically speaking, there usually is a plethora of documentation when major political decisions are made. Past documentation, for example, allowed political scientists to analyze decisions made by Kennedy during the Bay of Pigs,

Johnson during the Vietnam War, and Carter during the Iran hostage crisis. Inevitably, this documentation is most widely used for learning purposes within social science today.

Masterminds behind political decisions are not always motivated by depraved intentions; rather, their purpose may be honorable. If Bush had intentions all along to eventually invade Iraq, his rationale may have been based on information he received throughout his lifetime. He may have honestly believed that an attack was in America's best interest. President Obama, potentially came from a similar rationale. From the very beginning, America's most serious problem was the economic recession. However, Obama viewed the economy as a single objective for his administration to tackle. He regarded other reforms, such as healthcare, as equally important. The question remains with a particular conflict of interest. Were the other reforms urgent for the American public's interests, or urgent for Obama's personal list of accomplishments? As seen in the case studies, political motivations become distorted when other factors come into play, and unless the political actors admit what was going on inside their heads, the public will never truly know.

However these mistakes or miscalculations were made, the two administrations at one time or another resorted to cognitive mechanisms which altered their overall perception of political reality. Although it is impossible to infer the exact degree this influenced their political decisions, what can be inferred and taken from this study is that they both were influenced by cognitive barriers. These biases, or attempts to maintain consistency in a particular belief, ultimately had a substantive affect on the creation of foreign and domestic policy.



APPENDIX A:

Tenet Memo “We’re at War”



~~CONFIDENTIAL~~  
THE DIRECTOR OF CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20505

16 September 2001

DAC-04435201

MEMORANDUM FOR: DDCI  
DDCI/CM  
ExDIR  
D/ExDIR  
ADC/MS  
DDI  
DDO  
DPS&T  
C/NIC  
D/OCA  
C/CTC

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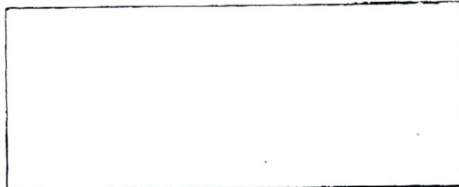
APPROVED FOR RELEASE  
DATE: OCT 2005

SUBJECT: We're at War

We must now finalize our strategy and leadership structure to wage a worldwide war against al-Qa'ida and other terrorist organizations. Our unrelenting focus must be on bringing all of our operational, analytical, and technical capabilities to bear--not only to protect the US both here and abroad from additional terrorist acts--but also, and more importantly, to neutralize and destroy al-Qa'ida and its partners.

This will require our absolute and total dedication as a leadership team. It will require your sustained focus and attention. It will require you to translate the urgency of the difficult tasks ahead to the men and women we lead by our behavior and actions.

There can be no bureaucratic impediments to success. All the rules have changed. There must be an absolute and full sharing of information, ideas, and capabilities. We do not have time to hold meetings to fix problems--fix them--quickly and smartly. Each person must assume an unprecedented degree of personal responsibility.



~~CONFIDENTIAL~~



~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

We must ensure that these same principles apply in dealing with our law enforcement, military, other civilian agencies, and Intelligence Community colleagues. Whatever systemic problems existed in any of these relationships must be identified and solved now.

There must be an absolute seamlessness in our approach to waging this war--and we must lead.

We must all be passionate and driven--but not breathless. We must stay cool. We must keep our heads. Never has our professionalism and discipline been at a greater premium. We must maintain these core values at all costs.

I have attached a list of priorities that we will need to coordinate and act upon immediately.

Together we will win this war and make our President and the American people proud. We will win this war on behalf of our fallen and injured brothers and sisters in New York and Washington and their families. We will win it for all that we value as a nation.

  
George J. Tenet

Attachment:  
As Stated

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

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