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AMERICAN INTERVENTION IN THE “NEW WORLD ORDER”

By

JULIE BENSON

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

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The decision to intervene in another state's affairs is one of the most controversial foreign policy decisions an American president can make during his or her administration. From calls for isolationism during World War II to protests against the 2003 invasion of Iraq, intervention policies are often contentious and debated both inside and outside the White House. What explains this decision? How do leaders decide to intervene, or not intervene? I argue that, following the end of the Cold War, the decision to intervene militarily was no longer constrained by anti-Soviet or anticommunist doctrine, but instead heavily influenced by the policy preferences of elite advisors within the executive branch. Using conflicts from the first four post-Cold War presidencies, I demonstrate the influence of key officials and advisors in the decision to intervene in the Persian Gulf War, Bosnia, Iraq in 2003, and Libya in 2011. I then examine three cases of non-interference in U.S. policy—not enacting regime change in Iraq after Operation Desert Storm, initial reluctance to intercede in the Bosnian civil war, and the refusal to intervene after the use of chemical weapons in Syria—to further showcase the role of executive elites in the decision not to intervene.

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Introduction

As ordinary citizens wielded sledgehammers and pickaxes to tear down the graffiti-covered Berlin Wall, the crumbling of concrete and rebar represented more than just the destruction of a border separating two halves of one city. It portended a similar collapse of the power that commissioned its construction and symbolized a fundamental shift in the composition of the international system. The world was no longer dominated by two nuclear superpowers; the United States stood alone in preeminence. Two years after the sledgehammers were shelved, then President George H.W. Bush stood before a joint session of Congress and declared a “new world order” in which the United Nations was “poised to fulfill the historic vision of its founders” and where “freedom and respect for human rights” could “find a home among all nations.”¹

In his book with his national security adviser Brent Scowcroft, former President George H.W. Bush describes his “new world order” concept, believing that after the end of the Cold War, the U.S. became “obligated to lead the world community to an unprecedented degree” and that America “should attempt to pursue our national interests, wherever possible, within a framework of concert without friends and the international community.”² With the United States as the sole superpower following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it was in a unique position to pursue its policy objectives and influence the future of the international system. Calls for multilateralism and respect for human rights, even if only nominally, were echoed in the first four presidencies of this new world order.

¹ “Transcript of President Bush’s Address on End of the Gulf War,” *New York Times*, March 7, 1991, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1991/03/07/350791.html?pageNumber=8>.

² George H.W. Bush and Brent A. Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1998), 718, Kindle.

Instead of intervention strategy being dominated by anti-Soviet and anticommunist doctrine, as it was during the postwar period,³ the fall of the Soviet Union and end of the protracted conflict left policymakers with a wide array of policy avenues to pursue. I argue that in the absence of an identity-defining enemy, like the role the U.S.S.R. played after the Second World War, key government officials were free to pursue their own policy preferences, which had an enormous impact on American intervention behavior. Key administration officials, from national security advisors to secretaries of state to UN ambassadors, were instrumental in the president's decision to involve the U.S. military in conflicts abroad.

My investigation into American intervention is broken down into the following sections. First, I look to John MacMillan and Christian Reus-Smit for their conceptions of the practice of international intervention. I next conduct an exploration into the vast literature surrounding a leader's decision to intervene before briefly discussing the use of archival methods in my study. In the subsequent section, I describe the role elites in the four post-Cold War presidencies have played in the decision to intervene militarily in Kuwait, Bosnia, Iraq, and Libya. I then contrast the positive cases of U.S. involvement with three examples of non-intervention, examining the refusal to enact regime change in Iraq after the Gulf War, early reluctance to intercede in the Bosnian conflict, and the failure to follow through on President Barack Obama's "red line" in Syria. I finally conclude with alternative explanations for U.S. intervention and avenues for further research.

What is intervention?

International intervention is a notoriously difficult concept to define. Different state and nonstate actions can be brought under the term's umbrella, from electoral interference to IMF

³ Mi Yung Yoon, "Explaining U.S. Intervention in Third World Internal Wars, 1945-1989," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 41, no.4 (Aug 1997): 582.

structural adjustment programs. For the purposes of this research, John MacMillan's definition of international intervention is a useful baseline. He imagines intervention as "'discrete acts' of 'coercive interference' in the 'domestic affairs' of other states, and which do not change the formal juridical status of the intervened party."⁴ This means that acts resulting in colonies, or the annexation of territory would not be classified as interventions. He further describes the act of intervention as a mode "of coercion relatively well-suited to the regulation or mediation of conflict between territorially bounded political communities and transnational social forces."⁵

MacMillan also distinguishes between intervention and non-intervention as explored in the academic literature, which is helpful for this investigation. He writes, "that the study of intervention has long been in the shadow of non-intervention has served to mask a fundamental difference between the two, which is that whilst non-intervention has been the norm within the core of the modern international system, intervention has long been permissive in relations between core and periphery."⁶ The decision to intervene, of course, is left to the discretion of the powerful. Great powers can coercively interfere in the affairs of less powerful states, while they remain isolated from the same danger from their peers.

Christian Reus-Smit calls into question the "sovereignty frame" that most international relations scholars use when discussing intervention. He presents another conception of international intervention, defining it as "the transgression of a unit's realm of jurisdiction, conducted by other units in an order, acting singly or collectively."⁷ Furthermore, he describes

⁴ John MacMillan, "Intervention and the ordering of the modern world," *Review of International Studies* 39 (2013): 1041.

⁵ MacMillan, "Intervention," 1039.

⁶ MacMillan, "Intervention," 1054.

⁷ Christian Reus-Smit, "The concept of intervention," *Review of International Studies* 39 (2013): 1058.

interventions as breaches designed to reconstruct the previous identities, institutions, and behaviors of the target of interference.⁸

Both MacMillan and Reus-Smit provide definitions of international intervention that elucidate the concept, while also being thorough enough to encapsulate its complexity. The combination of both contribute to a solid basis for a working definition useful here: international intervention is the “coercive interference” of a state or coalition of states in the internal affairs of another.

Why do states intervene?

While defining the behavior of intervention is a notably difficult task, perhaps more challenging is understanding why states do it in the first place. Scholars have long investigated why states intervene in the affairs of others, even if a rational analysis suggests otherwise. As Reus-Smit (2013) writes, interventions must always be justified because they violate a unit’s jurisdiction, which is one of the foundational principles of international society.⁹ In the following section, I explore the current literature on the justification of international intervention.

Paul Huth (1998) explores why major powers intervene to defend smaller states in the international arena. He looks at major power intervention between 1918 and 1988 to also understand when strategies of “extended deterrence” are utilized by these major powers.¹⁰ Employing a rational-choice framework, Huth avers that the leaders of major powers weigh both domestic political factors and national security interests when deciding intervention strategy.¹¹ The delicate balance between these two arenas leads to possible trade-offs between government

⁸ Reus-Smit, “The concept,” 1058.

⁹ Reus-Smit, “The concept,” 1058.

¹⁰ Paul K. Huth, “Major Power Intervention in International Crises, 1918-1988,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42, no.6 (December 1998): 745.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 746.

resources.¹² Leaders may also choose to intervene to shore up domestic political support and enhance their power positions,¹³ or refuse to intervene in foreign affairs if the resource constraints become unbearable.¹⁴ Huth's work is of particular interest for this study, as he focuses on the role that leaders play in intervention policy. While Huth modifies typical realist theory to explain the motives of these leaders, I argue that power calculations are not at the core of the decision-making process.

Mi Yung Yoon (1997) adds to intervention theory with her argument concerning U.S. intervention policy after the Second World War. She examines a combination of three variables—strategic, economic, and domestic—that influenced American intervention from 1945 to 1989.¹⁵ She argues that U.S. strategic interests, including anticommunist and containment doctrine, influenced when and where intervention occurred.¹⁶ Economic factors explain intervention policy through a Marxist analysis, as Yoon maintains the U.S. interfered in “third world” affairs to secure material resources and entry into new markets.¹⁷ The third prong of Yoon's argument—American domestic context—explains its intervention behavior through public opinion, economic, and electoral constraints.¹⁸ Using data from Eckhardt (1989) of Third World internal conflicts, she ultimately finds that national security factors best accounted for U.S. foreign interference, and that the economy and the presidential election cycle also acted as restrictions on intervention actions.¹⁹ Yoon's research is incredibly valuable for its wide scope, analyzing a multitude of factors from

¹² Ibid, 747.

¹³ Ibid, 746.

¹⁴ Ibid, 747.

¹⁵ Yoon, “Explaining U.S. Intervention,” 581.

¹⁶ Ibid, 582.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid, 583-84.

¹⁹ Ibid, 597.

national security to domestic economic performance. However, I am interested in the period following the end of the Cold War, and on the influence of domestic policymaking elites.

Alastair Smith (1996) studies the likelihood of third-party interventions in interstate conflicts. Focusing particularly on the impact of alliance reliability in the decision to intervene, Smith argues that states with dependable allies are more likely to pursue policies leading to conflict.²⁰ To demonstrate his argument, Smith designs a theoretical model of a three-nation system: an aggressor state, a target state, and a third-party state.²¹ Using data from Singer and Small (1996) and Bueno de Mesquita and Lalman (1992), his model evaluates how a target state will react to an armed conflict based on the reliability of its allies.²² Smith finds that alliances have a significant impact on the probability that a third-party state will intervene in a war.²³ In particular, he observes that target states are more likely to retaliate after being attacked if they believe their alliances to be reliable.²⁴ Furthermore, aggressor states are less likely to initiate conflicts if their target has dependable alliances.²⁵ Smith provides a fascinating addition to the intervention literature; however, my research is not necessarily restricted to intervention in interstate wars, as I am more interested in the specific intervention strategy of a single state.

In his 1998 contribution, Benjamin Miller investigates the logic underpinning U.S. intervention after the end of the Cold War. Contradicting mainstream arguments that claim there is no coherent rationale behind American intervention behavior after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Miller claims that the U.S. has followed a cost-benefit analysis predicated upon evaluations

²⁰ Alastair Smith, "To Intervene or Not to Intervene: A Biased Decision," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 40, no.1 (Mar 1996): 17.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

²² *Ibid.*, 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

of its regional interests.²⁶ He classifies intervention behavior as massive, medium, limited, or as non-interventions and illustrates each type with an example from American foreign policy.²⁷ Miller goes on to describe the causal relationship between the risk analysis and the intervention strategy ultimately pursued. He describes six different combinations of incentives and constraints that determine American intervention behavior: (1) high costs and high key interests suggest massive interventions; (2) low costs but high key interests lead to medium-scale policies; (3) low costs and high extrinsic interests also indicate medium-scale intervention; (4) high costs paired with high extrinsic interests lead to non-intervention; (5) low costs together with low interests can result in either limited policies or non-interference; and, finally, (6) high costs but low interests also result in non-intervention.²⁸ Miller's investigation is very useful in my own study of American intervention; however, while Miller focuses on the importance of a cost-benefit analysis, my argument is based on the policy preferences of elite government officials.

Examining intervention at the micro-level, Elizabeth Saunders (2009) considers how individual leaders affect intervention policies. She argues that leaders' beliefs about where threats originate determine the intervention policies they pursue.²⁹ Based on these perceptions, leaders will choose either transformative or non-transformative intervention strategies.³⁰ Transformative interventions, including nation-building policies, target the domestic structure and institutions of the enemy state.³¹ Alternatively, non-transformative interventions are much more limited in scope,

²⁶ Benjamin Miller, "The Logic of US Military Interventions in the post-Cold War Era," *Contemporary Security Policy* 19, no.3 (December 1998): 73-74.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 75-77.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 83-86.

²⁹ Elizabeth N. Saunders, "Transformative Choices: Leaders and the Origins of Intervention Strategy," *International Security* 34, no.2 (Fall 2009): 121.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

aiming at the resolution of a specific conflict.³² According to Saunders, “internally focused” leaders, who believe threats originate from the internal composition of enemy states, are inclined to follow transformative policy prescriptions.³³ “Externally focused” leaders, on the other hand, perceive a direct causal relationship between threats and the security policies of enemy states.³⁴ She uses the examples of U.S. Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson to demonstrate her argument, detailing how their differing causal beliefs affected their respective intervention strategies toward Vietnam.³⁵ Saunders’s article is perhaps the most influential in my argument, inspiring the elite-level focus. While she emphasized the effect of causal beliefs on intervention policy, I wish to explain how elites’ policy preferences affect the overall decision to intervene.

Walter Morales explores the rationales behind American interventions both during and after the Cold War. He argues that U.S. intervention behavior changed during this period, a change which can be explained by both public opinion and the makeup of the international system.³⁶ During the Cold War, he argues, U.S. intervention policies were built upon a foundation based on anticommunist doctrine.³⁷ Due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of a bipolar world, U.S. officials needed a new basis for military interventions in foreign states.³⁸ Policymakers in the post-Cold War era seek to justify intervention through international legal principles and democratization rhetoric.³⁹ He claims that with the end of the Cold War, the U.S. lost the unquestionable rationale it used to justify foreign interference after the Second World War: fervent

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid, 135.

³⁶ Waltraud Queiser Morales, “US intervention and the New World Order: lessons from Cold War and post-Cold War cases,” *Third World Quarterly* 15, no. 1(1994): 78.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid, 83-84.

anticommunism.⁴⁰ Furthermore, Morales argues that the post-Cold War justifications, such as democratization and human rights rhetoric, are unable to recreate the one-of-a-kind ability of containment doctrine to independently support U.S. foreign policy.⁴¹ While Morales focuses on the shift in American intervention rationales during and after the Cold War, my argument decidedly involves the decision to intervene or not intervene following the end of the conflict.

Michael J. Boyle and Anthony F. Lang, Jr. (2021) investigate how American intervention policies spread its political and economic culture across the world.⁴² They argue that America’s “strategic culture”—based on universalism, progressivism, pragmatism, and constitutionalism—can explain its intervention practices.⁴³ According to Boyle and Lang, Jr., American intervention follows two patterns: limited and vindicationist interventions.⁴⁴ Limited interventions are the default U.S. policy, while vindicationist are more rare and much more intrusive on the domestic institutions of the target state.⁴⁵ They further claim that variation in intervention practices can be explained by “strategic surprises,” such as the Pearl Harbor ambush and 9/11 terrorist attacks.⁴⁶ The authors employ two Cold War-era case studies of American intervention in Lebanon and the Dominican Republic to demonstrate the variation in policy.⁴⁷ While Boyle and Lang, Jr., present an interesting argument about U.S. intervention practices, they focus on Cold War studies, whereas my area of interest is after the end of the Cold War.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 95.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Michael J. Boyle and Anthony F. Lang, Jr., “Remaking the World in America’s Image: Surprise, Strategic Culture, and the American Ways of Intervention,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* (2021): 1.

⁴³ Ibid, 4.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 2.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 1-2.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 6.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 11.

Seung-Whan Choi and Patrick James (2016) explore three reasons behind American intervention abroad: terrorism, human rights violations, and democracy promotion.⁴⁸ They provide three hypotheses where U.S. military intervention is more likely: (1) high levels of terrorism; (2) more human rights abuses; and (3) low levels of democracy.⁴⁹ They also include some confounding variables that may complicate the statistical model, including alliances with the United States and economic development.⁵⁰ They rely upon time-series data of 164 states from 1981 to 2005 to underpin their argument. Choi and James find that the most consistent factor determining U.S. military intervention abroad is tied to the liberal hypothesis: the U.S. is more likely to intervene in states with high levels of human rights violations.⁵¹ The authors provide a compelling argument about the role of human rights abuses in American intervention policy; however, their time frame is limited, and the statistical model is unable to account for “real” motivations behind the decision to intervene because of national security classification issues.⁵²

While the intervention literature is rich in intriguing and compelling arguments, my exploration into American intervention in the post-Cold War era fills a gap previously understudied. The most common explanation for U.S. military intervention after the Second World War is a combination of anti-Soviet and anticommunist doctrine, whereas intervention in the 1990s and two-thousands tends to be less consistently dogmatic. When scholars do focus on post-Cold War intervention, they focus more holistically on American national interests.⁵³ When researchers

⁴⁸ Seung-Whan Choi and Patrick James, “Why Does the United States Intervene Abroad? Democracy, Human Rights Violations, and Terrorism,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 60, no.5 (August 2016): 899.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 905.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 907.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 913.

⁵² *Ibid*, 915.

⁵³ Miller, “The Logic,” 73-74.

do take a micro-level approach, like Saunders (2009), the case studies occur in the postwar period and focus on causal beliefs, not policy preferences.⁵⁴

My argument approaches U.S. intervention policy with a micro-level framework focused on the top officials within the government. I argue that the decision to intervene results from the policy preferences of elites in the executive branch. Using case studies from four of the post-Cold War era presidencies, I demonstrate the role that U.S. elite policy preferences have played in the decision to intervene.

Methods and Data

To select cases for my study, I employed the pathway case method. John Gerring (2008) describes the pathway case as one focused on a single causal factor, where this variable is isolated to study its distinct effect on the dependent variable.⁵⁵ Arguing for its utility, Gerring writes that this type of case “is useful principally for elucidating causal mechanisms rather than verifying or falsifying general propositions.”⁵⁶ I believe that this method of case selection is appropriate for my investigation into American intervention practices because I am interested in a single causal factor—the preferences of executive branch elites—on the dependent variable—the decision to intervene. According to King, Keohane, and Verba (1994), “framing a case study around an explanatory question may lead to more focused and relevant description, even if the study is ultimately thwarted in its attempt to provide even a single valid causal inference.”⁵⁷ Despite the pathway case’s weakness in the verification or falsification of general theories, I argue that the

⁵⁴ Saunders, “Transformative,” 121.

⁵⁵ John Gerring, “Case Selection for Case-Study Analysis: Qualitative and Quantitative Techniques,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Methodology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 664.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 666.

⁵⁷ Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 45.

explanatory value in comparative case studies provides sufficient support to my theory of U.S. intervention.

As I wish to examine American intervention behavior in the post-Cold War era, I have decided to select an intervention from each presidency in that period, beginning with that of George H.W. Bush and ending with the tenure of Barack Obama. The U.S. intervention in the First Gulf War is an important case to study, as it is following this conflict that Bush, Sr., declared the new world order based on U.S.-led multilateralism and respect for human rights.⁵⁸ During Bill Clinton's administration, the intervention of interest is in the Balkans, specifically American involvement in the war in Bosnia. This is an important case for study due to the initial reluctance of policymakers to intervene, and because of the important leadership role the U.S. eventually played in the multilateral intervention and peace settlement. The intervention during the second Bush administration I chose is the 2003 invasion of Iraq, especially because the debate within the top echelons of the government has been widely reported, providing a strong example of the pathway case. The Libyan intervention during Obama's administration is a worthwhile study in a similar fashion, as it is well-known that the decision to intervene was hotly debated within the executive branch.

My argument aims to explain why the U.S. intervenes in some situations and not in others. To fulfill the second part of my claim and juxtapose with the positive cases of intervention, I selected three instances of non-interference to also investigate. During the George H.W. Bush administration, some foreign policy hawks were angered at the decision to leave Saddam Hussein's regime intact after the end of combat operations in Operation Desert Storm. In the Clinton White House, advisors were divided and initially reluctant to get involved in the Balkan morass, dubbed

⁵⁸ "Transcript of President Bush's Address."

“the problem from hell.”⁵⁹ Finally, I decided to investigate American inaction in Syria, once again due to administration infighting among Obama’s officials, despite the crossing of the “red line” and the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime.⁶⁰

Marc Ventresca and John Mohr (2002) define archival methods as “those that involve the study of historical documents: that is, documents created at some point in the relatively distant past, providing us with access that we might not otherwise have to the organizations, individuals, and events of that earlier time.”⁶¹ They continue, adding that in the digital era, “archival methods can also be applied to the analysis of digital texts including electronic databases, emails, and web pages.”⁶² The archived collections of the administrations of interest are an important source of evidence for my argument. This material includes memorandums, notes, and recorded minutes from meetings and public letters, among others.

However, my research was limited by two different types of constraints: classification issues and physical access. Due to the sensitive nature of the information that I sought, many pertinent documents had still yet to be declassified, especially regarding the relatively recent presidencies of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. When documents were declassified, sometimes they were only partially so, giving me an incomplete picture of behind-the-scenes decision making. In terms of physical constraints, many of the primary source documents I would have been interested in are only available in the physical location of the archived collection, such

⁵⁹ Thomas L. Friedman, “Bosnia Reconsidered; Where Candidate Clinton Saw a Challenge The President Sees an Insoluble Quagmire,” *New York Times*, April 8, 1993, <https://www.nytimes.com/1993/04/08/world/bosnia-reconsidered-where-candidate-clinton-saw-challenge-president-sees.html>.

⁶⁰ Patrice Taddonio, “‘The President Blinked’: Why Obama Changed Course on the ‘Red Line’ in Syria,” *PBS Frontline*, May 25, 2015, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-president-blinked-why-obama-changed-course-on-the-red-line-in-syria/>.

⁶¹ Marc J. Ventresca and John W. Mohr, “Archival Research Methods,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Organizations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2002), 805.

⁶² Ventresca and Mohr, “Archival,” 805.

as the presidential library or the National Archives. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, access to physical collections was extremely limited, if available at all due to city and state restrictions.

Nevertheless, I was able to access a great deal of relevant material through records published online through the official libraries and through George Washington University's National Security Archive. I also depended upon written works, including memoirs of administration officials and journalistic accounts of executive decision making. Opinion pieces authored by and interviews with policymakers, before and during the interventions under study here, were also useful in uncovering the policy preferences of elites when primary archival material was unavailable.

U.S. intervention in Kuwait, Bosnia, Iraq, and Libya

The Persian Gulf War, 1990-91

In late July of 1990, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein began amassing troops near the border with its southern neighbor, Kuwait, with some estimations claiming as many as 120,000 troops.⁶³ Tensions between the two states had been escalating, following disputes about oil prices, territory, and debt from the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, in which Kuwait aided Iraq.⁶⁴ Despite efforts by others in the Middle East to avoid a crisis, mediation talks broke down on August 1. In the early hours of the following morning, Iraqi troops marched into Kuwait, capturing its capital and assuming control of its valuable oilfields.⁶⁵

On the morning of August 2, President Bush spoke to reporters in the White House Cabinet room prior to a National Security Council (NSC) meeting concerning the Iraqi invasion. A brief

⁶³ R.w. Apple Jr., "Invading Iraqis Seize Kuwait and Its Oil; U.S. Condemns Attack, Urges United Action," *New York Times*, August 3, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/03/world/worldspecial/invading-iraqis-seize-kuwait-and-its-oil-us-condemns.html?searchResultPosition=4>.

⁶⁴ Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 565.

⁶⁵ Apple Jr., "Invading."

interaction with Helen Thomas from United Press International purportedly shows Bush's thinking at the time in terms of a U.S. response. When asked if he was considering intervention to counter Saddam's transgression against Kuwait, Bush was guarded, asserting that the administration was not prepared to intervene or send American troops abroad, while also maintaining that he would not be forthcoming with such information even if the opposite were true.⁶⁶ Taking Mr. Bush at his word, we can assume that a military intervention was not on the table during the early stages of the Gulf conflict.

In the meeting that followed this exchange, the president and his advisors discussed international reactions, the effect on oil production, and potential military strategy, as reported by the partially declassified minutes.⁶⁷ Director of the Office of Management and Budget, Richard Darman, emphasized a distinction between Iraq's invasion of Kuwait and a potential attack against Saudi Arabia, a much closer U.S. ally and greater producer of oil.⁶⁸ Then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell was the first in the meeting to emphasize the "great national interest" in both objectives.⁶⁹ He describes two operations developed by the JCS and the commander-in-chief of central command if a military route is favored: "tier one" is a single precise attack on Iraqi forces in response to the annexation of Kuwait, short of a full-scale invasion; "tier two" involved a much more elaborate exercise, including American boots on the ground to defend Saudi Arabia and liberate Kuwait, if desired.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ "Remarks and an Exchange With Reporters on the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait," Public Papers, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, August 2, 1990, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2123>.

⁶⁷ Meeting of the NSC/Deputy Committee Meeting, "Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait," minutes. 2 August 1990, Richard N. Hass Files, The National Security Archive, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/24306-national-security-council-meeting-august-2-1990>.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

However, U.S. strategy in the Persian Gulf remained unclear. The following day on the South Lawn of the White House, the president once again spoke to the U.S. press about the ongoing invasion of Kuwait. There he stated that “all options are open -- economic and otherwise,”⁷¹ in an apparent contradiction to his previous statements. However, during a news conference on August 8, the president maintained that the U.S. troops sent to Saudi Arabia were defensive in nature, and that it was “not the mission to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait,” instead relying on economic sanctions to accomplish that objective.⁷² He continued, maintaining that the U.S. was “not in a war” and that American troops were only sent “to defend Saudi Arabia.”⁷³

Despite these numerous public assertions, three days later, in another exchange between the president and the press, the U.S. purpose in the Gulf appeared to have changed. When asked about the administration’s strategy, Bush told reporters that “the goal is to get Iraq out, obviously, of Kuwait and have the legitimate rulers return. That is the goal.”⁷⁴ While continuing to stress the importance of economic sanctions in this objective, an emphasis on the liberation of Kuwait was new, now more than just a mere afterthought. By the 14th, ejecting Saddam’s forces from Kuwait took the main stage as the primary U.S. goal in the Persian Gulf crisis. Responding to an inquiry about his reaction to a proposal from Saddam to negotiate, Bush criticized it, insisting that “it did not address itself to the fundamental problem” and that Iraq must “get out of Kuwait and they’ve got to let the rightful rulers return.”⁷⁵

⁷¹ “Remarks and an Exchange With Reporters on the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait,” Public Papers, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, August 3, 1990, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2135>.

⁷² “The President’s News Conference,” Public Papers, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, August 8, 1990, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2148>.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ “Remarks and an Exchange With Reporters on the Persian Gulf Crisis,” Public Papers, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, August 11, 1990, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2158>.

⁷⁵ “The President’s News Conference,” Public Papers, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, August 14, 1990, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2162>.

As the weeks wore on and a diplomatic resolution appeared further and further out of reach, the rhetoric surrounding the U.S. mission in the Gulf took on a different tone. During a press conference at the White House Briefing Room on November 8, the president told reporters that offensive forces were officially deployed to Saudi Arabia, marking a distinct shift in the objective of American troops in the Persian Gulf.⁷⁶ In a letter to Congress on the 16th, Bush justified the deployment, arguing that the additional forces “will ensure that the coalition has an adequate offensive military option should that be necessary to achieve our common goals.”⁷⁷ By the end of the month, due to extensive U.S. lobbying,⁷⁸ the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 678, authorizing member states to employ “all necessary means” to ensure Iraqi compliance with prior resolutions that demanded its unconditional exit from Kuwait by January 15, 1991.⁷⁹

What changed? Why did the U.S. objective shift from defending Saudi Arabia from a potential Iraqi invasion to expelling Saddam’s forces from Kuwait and ending the occupation? I argue that it was a concerted effort by a group of policymakers—NSC advisor Scowcroft, Chairmen of the JCS General Powell, and Secretary of State Baker and of Defense Cheney—that influenced official policy from a defensive to an offensive position in the Gulf. We can see the early signs of a pivot toward Kuwait liberation just two days after the initial invasion. During a morning meeting of the NSC at Camp David on August 4, administration officials met once again

⁷⁶ “The President’s News Conference on the Persian Gulf Crisis,” Public Papers, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, November 8, 1990, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2416>.

⁷⁷ “Letter to Congressional Leaders on the Deployment of Additional United States Armed Forces to the Persian Gulf,” Public Papers, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, November 16, 1990, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2454>.

⁷⁸ Thomas L. Friedman, “MIDEAST TENSIONS; How U.S. Won Support to Use Mideast Forces The Iraq Resolution: A U.S.-Soviet Collaboration -- A special report,” *New York Times*, December 2, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/02/world/mideast-tensions-us-won-support-use-mideast-forces-iraq-resolution-us-soviet.html>.

⁷⁹ United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Res 678 (29 November 1990) UN Doc S/22033.

to discuss potential military responses to Iraqi aggression. General Powell is the first official, according to the meeting's minutes, who mentions U.S. forces marching into Kuwait following the Iraqi invasion. He describes "a longstanding plan defined over the last few weeks," telling the president that the plan would "achieve the mission of defending Saudi Arabia and a basis for moving north into Kuwait."⁸⁰ He is confident in an American victory, arguing that "Saddam does not want to mess with us. Therefore, I believe we need to get the Americans in - we need to show the flag."⁸¹ While President Bush reiterates that the main objective of U.S. policy would be to protect and defend Saudi Arabia from Iraqi forces and retaliation, his advisors are not all in agreement.⁸² Secretary Baker insists that the administration should be focused on ejecting Saddam's troops from Kuwait, with Secretary Cheney agreeing, asserting that they "can't let Saddam hold on to Kuwait."⁸³ NSC advisor Scowcroft is also supportive of the Kuwaiti liberation policy objective, stating that "our first goal is to get [Saddam] out of Kuwait."⁸⁴ Almost from the outset of the invasion and annexation, these four policy advisors emphasized the liberation of Kuwait as a crucial American foreign policy goal, and carried enormous influence with the president to shape the country's intervention strategy.

Scowcroft recalls disbelief in reaction to the general tenor of the first NSC meeting on the Iraqi invasion, writing that he was "frankly appalled at the undertone of the discussion, which suggested resignation to the invasion."⁸⁵ According to Scowcroft, when consulting with the president on last minute speech changes for his address in Aspen that same day, "it became obvious

⁸⁰ Meeting of the National Security Council, "Minutes of NSC Meeting on Iraqi invasion of Kuwait," minutes. 4 August 1990, Richard N. Hass Files, The National Security Archive, p. 2, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/24309-national-security-council-meeting-august-4-1990>.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 4.

⁸² Ibid, p. 5.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 6.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 7.

⁸⁵ Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 582.

to me that the president was prepared to use force to evict Saddam from Kuwait if it became necessary.”⁸⁶ However, according to Bush himself, the decision was not as clear-cut. Bush describes an interaction with General Powell in which Powell “remarked that he felt I really had declared war on Iraq that Sunday [August 5] ...In retrospect, I don’t know if I had yet determined that the use of force would be required.”⁸⁷ In mid-August, after a meeting with the Saudis, Bush was still unsure about the use of force to eject Saddam from Kuwait, believing it to be too soon to consider military operations.⁸⁸

NSC Advisor Scowcroft remembers a discussion around the unilateral use of force to expel the Iraqis, describing Robert Gates, Cheney, and himself as “the hard-liners...urging that we had to act, even...unilaterally.”⁸⁹ Bush writes that Secretary Cheney was an early advocate for the use of force and was “probably ahead of his military on this.”⁹⁰ During another meeting of the NSC on October 11, the core staff went over the military options for an offensive operation in the Gulf.⁹¹ General Powell was not optimistic about the success of an air campaign and insisted that American boots on the ground would be necessary to liberate Kuwait.⁹² By the end of August, the president had shifted his focus more and more to the use of force, claiming that he was unable to imagine Saddam leaving Kuwait without military intervention.⁹³ Scowcroft confirms this, arguing that, by October, it was clear to him that the president believed military force was the only possible course of action to remove Iraqi troops from Kuwaiti soil.⁹⁴

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 602.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 634.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 639.

⁹⁰ Ibid, 643.

⁹¹ Ibid, 686.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid, 641.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 688.

While Secretary Baker was a staunch supporter of the liberation of Kuwait, as a diplomat, he was more hesitant to immediately support military action over a multilateral United Nations-based effort. Bush recollects Baker as “reluctant” to consider the use of force and strongly advocated for the use of diplomacy and economic sanctions to “get the job done.”⁹⁵ He continues, writing that Baker “never backed away from any decision to use force or planning for it, but he advised pushing the diplomatic course first and giving sanctions more time.”⁹⁶ Bush was supportive of Baker’s diplomatic efforts, encouraging him to work with the Soviets for a draft resolution, which would become Security Council Resolution 678, to authorize the use of force to ensure Iraqi compliance with previous rulings by January 15, 1991.⁹⁷ The president described the new resolution as “a tremendous breakthrough” that strengthened the international coalition and kept the Soviet Union in line with American goals.⁹⁸ The effect of Baker’s diplomatic efforts on the administration’s intervention strategy was clear. Bush was determined to work with Gorbachev and give the sanctions as much time as possible to attempt to coerce Saddam into withdrawing from Kuwait without unnecessarily sending American soldiers into the Gulf. After the passage of the UN resolution, Bush proposed high level meetings between the U.S. and Iraq in a last-ditch effort to prevent a military confrontation.⁹⁹ The president wrote in a December 14 diary entry, “I cannot say that I have made the determination to pull the trigger,” but was resolved to make a clear decision by the mid-January deadline.¹⁰⁰ Shortly after the new year, Bush told his top advisors, including Baker and Scowcroft, to arrange a final meeting to alert Saddam of American and

⁹⁵ Ibid, 642.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 733.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 743-45.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 750.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 764.

coalition resolve to liberate Kuwait.¹⁰¹ The January 9 meeting between Baker and Iraqi Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz represented the final attempt for a peaceful settlement to the Persian Gulf crisis.¹⁰² The encounter was decidedly unproductive but allowed the president to exhaust all other means of obtaining a non-military resolution.

As the UN-imposed deadline crept closer and closer, last-minute efforts to resolve the crisis peacefully failed. At seven p.m. Eastern Standard Time, Operation Desert Storm officially commenced when coalition forces began bombing targets in Iraq and Kuwait.¹⁰³ The air campaign waged for six weeks, followed by 100 hours of fighting by ground forces.¹⁰⁴ Offensive military operations were suspended at midnight on February 28, 1991, formally ending the Persian Gulf War.¹⁰⁵

America's descent into the "problem from hell," 1995

Following the death of Josep Tito in 1980, internal political tensions surged in the Balkan state of Yugoslavia, particularly between Serbia and Croatia and Slovenia.¹⁰⁶ Nationalism and separatism among Yugoslavia's six republics grew, culminating in the independence declarations of Slovenia and Croatia in 1991.¹⁰⁷ Caught between Serb and Croat nationalists, the Bosnian government held a vote on its own independence in early 1992, resulting in an overwhelming

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 779.

¹⁰² Ibid, 787.

¹⁰³ "Statement on Allied Military Action in the Persian Gulf," Public Papers, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, January 16, 1991, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2624>.

¹⁰⁴ "Address to the Nation on the Suspension of Allied Offensive Combat Operations in the Persian Gulf," Public Papers, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, February 27, 1991, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2746>.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ David Binder, "Evolution in Europe; Yugoslavia Seen Breaking Up Soon," *New York Times*, November 28, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/11/28/world/evolution-in-europe-yugoslavia-seen-breaking-up-soon.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

¹⁰⁷ Michael A. Sells, *The Bridge Betrayed: Religion and Genocide in Bosnia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 7.

majority—of Bosnian Muslims and Bosnian Croats—supporting independence for the republic.¹⁰⁸ Bosnian Serbs boycotted the referendum, and subsequently declared their own independence and the formation of a Bosnian Serb state, the Republika Srpska.¹⁰⁹ On April 6, 1992, after Bosnia-Herzegovina received official recognition from both the UN and the European Commission (EC), Bosnian Serbs shelled the majority Muslim capital of Sarajevo, violently marking the start of the conflict in Bosnia.¹¹⁰

Presidential candidate Bill Clinton was an early supporter of U.S. military involvement in the Bosnian war.¹¹¹ Campaigning against a reluctant Bush, Clinton vowed to use American power to put an end to the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans.¹¹² He advocated for limited air strikes in defense of humanitarian agencies working in the region and called on the U.S. military to aid the effort.¹¹³ He even went as far as to support lifting of the arms embargo against the Bosnian government, which disproportionately affected the Bosnian Muslims.¹¹⁴ In the first months of his presidency, Clinton's determination to help end the crisis in Bosnia did not wane. In a February 1993 meeting of the Principals Committee, Clinton told his advisors that the U.S. must take a leadership role in the crisis.¹¹⁵ After the Bosnian Serb attack on Srebrenica in March, concern began to mount in the U.S. about the lack of viability of a political resolution.¹¹⁶ A Principals

¹⁰⁸ David Rieff, *Slaughterhouse: Bosnia and the Failure of the West* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 17.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas H. Henrikson, *Cycles in US Foreign Policy since the Cold War* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillian, 2017), 78.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ Ivo H. Daalder, *Getting to Dayton: The Making of America's Bosnia Policy* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 2000), 6.

¹¹² Rieff, *Slaughterhouse*, 27, 118.

¹¹³ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, 6.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

meeting toward the end of the month resulted in two policy options: the lift and strike plan, which was opposed by America's European allies, or a cease-fire designed to protect the Bosniaks.¹¹⁷

Clinton's policy advisors were divided. While Vice President Al Gore and UN Ambassador Madeleine Albright supported air strikes on Bosnian Serb targets, National Security Advisor Anthony Lake and Secretary of State Warren Christopher favored the lifting of the arms embargo and limited air strikes.¹¹⁸ The cease-fire policy was favored by the Defense Department, including its secretary, Les Aspin.¹¹⁹ Yet other military experts, including then Chairman of the JCS General Powell and NATO Supreme Commander General John Shalikashvili, claimed that a significant number of ground troops would be needed to support an air strikes operation.¹²⁰ By May of 1993, it appeared as though most of the administration's key players had come to support the lift and strike plan, except for Secretary Aspin, who still favored a cease-fire.¹²¹ However, Clinton's support for the lift and strike option quickly shriveled up as he learned of European opposition to the plan, undermining Christopher's diplomatic mission to rally the allies around the military intervention.¹²² American strategy toward Bosnia swung away from intervention and back to the Bush policy of containment.¹²³

With the failure of the lift and strike policy, the U.S. deferred to Europe in addressing the Bosnian war.¹²⁴ Despite consistent outrage over the humanitarian crisis in Bosnia, the administration refused to take a more forceful stance without the backing of Europe, especially

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 13.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 12.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 13.

¹²¹ Ibid, 15.

¹²² Klaus Larres, "'Bloody as Hell'. Bush, Clinton and the Abdication of American Leadership in the former Yugoslavia, 1990-1995," *Journal of European Integration History* 10, no.1 (2004): 198.

¹²³ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, 19.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 18.

that of the United Kingdom and France whose troops were on the ground as part of UNPROFOR. In May of 1993, the U.S. joined the U.K., France, Spain, and Russia to create the Joint Action Plan that established “safe areas” to protect the “besieged Muslims in and around six Bosnian cities” and called for an influx of UN humanitarian troops.¹²⁵ However, in a move that weakened European resolve to use force, Bosnian Serbs temporarily discontinued their onslaught against the safe havens, only to ramp up the assaults once again by the end of the year.¹²⁶

In a late January 1994 meeting between the president and his top foreign policy officials, it was decided that the United States must take a more active leadership role in facilitating negotiations and consider the use of air power to bring an end to the conflict.¹²⁷ The next month saw the Sarajevo Ultimatum after a brutal attack on a marketplace that left 68 people dead and more injured.¹²⁸ In the aftermath, the Clinton administration reworked a French proposal to suggest the establishment of a demilitarized zone around Sarajevo and demanded that all parties, including the Bosniaks, hand over “heavy weapons” to UN-controlled forces by February 21.¹²⁹ The U.S. continued to take a leading role in settlement talks, as demonstrated in the success of the Washington Agreement in March, which put forward the formation of a Bosnian Muslim-Croat federation and finally achieved the goal of isolating the Serbs in negotiations.¹³⁰

Unfortunately, the feeling of triumph by the Clinton White House did not last long. Tensions between NATO member states were coming to a head in what would be called “the worst

¹²⁵ John Pomfret, “‘Joint Action Program’ For Bosnia Leaves Muslims Disillusioned,” *Washington Post*, May 25, 1993, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1993/05/25/joint-action-program-for-bosnia-leaves-muslims-disillusioned/7a33fa15-48dc-485e-9198-54a032e12ba1/>.

¹²⁶ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, 23.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 24.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, 25.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 25-26.

¹³⁰ *Ibid*, 27.

crisis within the Atlantic since 1956.”¹³¹ The U.S.’s refusal to supply American boots on the ground to assist UNPROFOR despite its calls for the lift and strike policy angered some allies who believed the U.S. was not “burden sharing.”¹³² The rift also threatened a cohesive strategy for the Bosnian conflict, with France calling for the provision of U.S. troops to acquiesce to air strikes and the U.K. refusing to accept the lifting of the arms embargo.¹³³ Rather than risk the failure of the NATO alliance, the U.S. backed off its air strikes proposal, once again deferring to the Europeans and adopting a policy of conflict containment.¹³⁴

When the conflict showed no signs of reaching a peaceful conclusion, especially after the Bosnian Serb offensives during the summer of 1994, NATO officials began reviewing contingency plans for the withdrawal and rescue of vulnerable UNPROFOR troops, should the situation deteriorate further.¹³⁵ Due to the administration’s priority of alliance unity, the U.S. had also implicitly decided that America’s responsibility to the alliance “could mean nothing less than that the United States would have to participate, with troops on the ground” in any withdrawal operation.¹³⁶ With UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali’s call for a review of the organization’s peacekeeping operation in May 1995, the specter of American boots on the ground in the Balkans steadily grew.¹³⁷ While some officials, especially in the State Department, feared such implications

¹³¹ Ibid, 33.

¹³² Kersti Larsson, “The Development of a NATO Strategy in Bosnia-Herzegovina,” *Pursuing Strategy New Security Challenges Series*, January 1, 2012, 69.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, 33.

¹³⁵ Ibid, 46.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 46-47.

¹³⁷ William Drozdiak, “Total Review of Peacekeeping Ordered by U.N.,” *Washington Post*, May 13, 1995, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1995/05/13/total-review-of-peacekeeping-ordered-by-un/a907d334-e214-473a-90c7-5d6f52c6ce70/>.

of a removal of UNPROFOR forces, others, including the president, saw an opportunity to finally put an end to the war.¹³⁸

Why did the Clinton administration change its policy? Who convinced the president that a more active and forceful intervention strategy was needed? It wasn't until late 1994-early 1995 when the U.S. began to seriously contemplate using military force, via a bombing campaign, to end the conflict.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, many administration officials were still wary of involving U.S. troops directly in the conflict. In late February 1995, U.S. policy was still to “muddle through while supporting the Bosnians,” unwilling to further upset NATO allies.¹⁴⁰ In spite of this reluctance, according to a summary of the February 21 meeting of the Principals Committee, top administration officials “discussed options for the longer term should diplomatic efforts fail to achieve a negotiated settlement.”¹⁴¹

That same month, National Security Advisor Anthony Lake commissioned a review of all policy options, given the likely outcome of continued fighting in the spring.¹⁴² The Bosnia Interagency Working Group (IWG) presented four options: continue with the status quo, pursue active containment, quarantine the Bosnian Serbs, and lift and strike, including arming and training Bosniak forces.¹⁴³ The policy paper from the IWG was presented at another Principals Committee meeting in March.¹⁴⁴ The top officials at the State Department supported a continuation of current U.S. policy, prioritizing the prevention of an escalation in the conflict as the cease-fire negotiated

¹³⁸ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, 60-61.

¹³⁹ Larres, “‘Bloody as Hell,’” 179.

¹⁴⁰ National Security Council et al., “PC/DC [Principals Committee/Deputies Committee] Meetings on Bosnia, February 1995 [1],” *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed March 18, 2022, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/72191>.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Daddler, *Getting to Dayton*, 87.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

by Carter was due to expire.¹⁴⁵ The Pentagon favored the adoption of a neutral stance, and the NSC staff advocated for lifting the arms embargo multilaterally.¹⁴⁶

Secretary Christopher's preference for a diplomatic settlement and opposition to U.S. military involvement was incredibly influential in determining American intervention strategy, particularly during the first years of the Clinton presidency. In an appearance on CBS News's *Face the Nation* in March of 1993, Christopher described the conflict in the Balkans as "a problem from hell" and that the U.S. "simply doesn't have the means to make people in that region of the world like each other."¹⁴⁷ The failure of his European trip to advance the U.S. policy of lift and strike had a significant effect on Christopher's policy prescriptions and subsequently on American intervention strategy.¹⁴⁸ Secretary Christopher moved to "rein in" the U.S.'s Bosnia policy, going so far as to adopt the language of previous detractors.¹⁴⁹

UN Ambassador Albright was the most hawkish foreign policy advisor throughout the Bosnian conflict.¹⁵⁰ She was consistently concerned with the perception of American weakness as the violence continued to escalate, and often insisted upon a more aggressive strategy when asked.¹⁵¹ As early as April 1993, in a memo to the president, she pushed for the administration to support air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs and to bomb the routes used by Serbia to get around the arms embargo.¹⁵² In an August 3, 1995, memorandum for Lake, Albright expressed support

¹⁴⁵ National Security Council et al., "PC/DC [Principals Committee/Deputies Committee] Meetings on Bosnia, March 1995 [3]," *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed March 19, 2022, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/72198>.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Friedman, "Bosnia Reconsidered."

¹⁴⁸ Carole Hodge, *Britain and the Balkans: 1991 until the present* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 56.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, 92.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Elaine Sciolino, "Madeleine Albright's Audition," *New York Times Magazine*, September 22, 1996, <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/09/22/magazine/madeleine-albright-s-audition.html>.

for the national security advisor's altered lift and strike policy.¹⁵³ She also described dismay at the broader administration's reluctance to take a more involved role in the Balkan crisis, fearing it "has placed at risk our leadership of the post Cold War world."¹⁵⁴ She tells Lake that the U.S. "must base our plan on using military pressure" because "our only successes have come when the Bosnian Serbs faced a credible threat of military force."¹⁵⁵ Furthermore, she asserts that American air power should be used "to help the Bosnians by changing the balance of power."¹⁵⁶

Lake, along with his deputy Sandy Berger, served as one of Clinton's top foreign policy consultants during the 1992 presidential campaign. Together, they were responsible for the campaign's strong stance on Bosnia, aimed at demonstrating the leadership failure of the Bush administration during the early months of the Balkan crisis.¹⁵⁷ Lake's influence did not end on the campaign trail, however. In his position as the president's National Security Advisor, he initiated a Bosnian policy review and oversaw the creation of the endgame strategy, which would eventually become the backbone of the U.S. intervention strategy toward the end of the conflict. In an interview with PBS *Frontline*, Lake describes the endgame strategy he developed with a few other administration officials, saying that "it is time to put a stop to this, period, whatever the cost."¹⁵⁸ According to Lake, the president was aware of the development of this strategy beginning in March of 1995 as the policy began to take shape.¹⁵⁹ During his August trip to rally allied support, Lake told the Europeans that the U.S. "believed it was time to allow the UN mission in Bosnia to collapse

¹⁵³ National Security Council and Records Management Office, "Declassified Documents concerning Bosnia," *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed March 20, 2022, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/36591>.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, 82.

¹⁵⁸ Tony Lake, "The Clinton Years Interview: Tony Lake," interview by Chris Bury, *Frontline*, PBS, September 2000, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/clinton/interviews/lake.html>.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

if it had to” to prevent further hostage-taking and that “we were going to use much more vigorous bombing if necessary” to reach a settlement.¹⁶⁰

In an August 5, 1995, memorandum to the president, Lake summarized the arguments presented in policy papers by Clinton’s top advisors before a scheduled meeting of the Foreign Policy Group.¹⁶¹ Lake noted points of agreement between himself and Ambassador Albright, writing that they both support preservation of a Bosnian state where the Muslims and Croats control about half of the territory and that “anything less would be tantamount to” rewarding Serbian aggression.¹⁶² Lake and Albright were early allies in the administration, both favoring a more active approach to the war in Bosnia.¹⁶³ At the July 17 Principals meeting, Lake had proposed the beginnings of the endgame strategy, including the establishment of an intact Bosnian state, and Albright voiced her full support, even of the smaller details of the plan.¹⁶⁴ Meanwhile, Secretary Christopher was warier, worried that the potential costs of failure “loomed larger than the possible benefits” due to insufficient U.S. leverage.¹⁶⁵ In the early August memo, Lake also describes the alternative proposals by State and Defense, which advocated a “more limited commitment,” echoing Christopher’s concerns.¹⁶⁶ In the end, despite the lack of enthusiasm from the State Department, President Clinton expressed support for both Albright’s and Lake’s approach.¹⁶⁷ The next day’s meeting saw Clinton formally endorse Lake’s endgame strategy and send his National

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ National Security Council and Records Management Office, “Declassified Documents concerning Bosnia,” *Clinton Digital Library*, accessed March 22, 2022, <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/36591>.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, 82-83.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 100.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 101.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 109.

Security Advisor across the Atlantic to inform Europe of his new, and firm, intervention policy for Bosnia.¹⁶⁸

Saddam Revisited, 2003

On March 17, 2003, President George W. Bush stood in the Cross Hall at the White House as he addressed the nation, issuing an ultimatum to Saddam Hussein and threatening military force if the Iraqi leader and his sons refused to leave their country.¹⁶⁹ Two days later, American troops crossed the Iraqi border from Kuwait, officially signaling the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom.¹⁷⁰ Within three weeks, facing little or weak resistance, U.S. and allied troops had reached Baghdad and toppled Saddam's regime.¹⁷¹ At the beginning of May, President Bush appeared in front of a "mission accomplished" banner aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln and declared the formal end of major combat operations in Iraq.¹⁷² However, the war was far from over, and the region forever changed.

The September 11 attacks in 2001 shocked the world and fundamentally shifted the foreign policy objectives of the George W. Bush administration. The post-9/11 world saw a U.S. foreign policy dominated by concerns over weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and state-sponsored terrorism, with Iraq firmly in the crosshairs.¹⁷³ While official planning for regime change occurred between 2002 and 2003, some administration officials had their eyes on an Iraq free from Saddam Hussein for years, even as far back as Operation Desert Storm.¹⁷⁴

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 111.

¹⁶⁹ "President Says Saddam Hussein Must Leave Iraq Within 48 Hours," Office of the Press Secretary, March 17, 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/03/20030317-7.html>.

¹⁷⁰ Walter Perry, et al., *Operation IRAQI FREEDOM: Decisive War, Elusive Peace* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1214.html, 64-65.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 183.

¹⁷² Ibid, 8.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 28.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 57.

Since the end of the first Gulf War, many in America's foreign policy sector believed that Saddam posed a major threat to U.S. national interests and the broader international system. During the years between the Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, all three administrations had similar initial policies toward Iraq: a combination of containment and regime change.¹⁷⁵ In the first few months of George W. Bush's presidency, it appeared as though the policies of the previous administrations toward Iraq were continuing, namely international sanctions and weapons inspections.¹⁷⁶ However, the importance of regime change in U.S. policy grew compared to its containment counterpart prior to the 2003 invasion.¹⁷⁷ Despite not becoming official U.S. strategy until the passage of the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, regime change plagued the minds of administration officials. Policymakers were "clearly interested in removing Saddam from power even before the first Gulf War ended."¹⁷⁸

Even some officials within the first Bush White House were critical of the decision to refrain from toppling Saddam.¹⁷⁹ In a November 1997 op-ed in the *Washington Post*, Zalmay Khalilzad and Paul Wolfowitz argued that Saddam "will continue to pose a threat to the security and stability of a large and important part of the world as long as he remains in power."¹⁸⁰ They suggested that the U.S. "consider a comprehensive new strategy aimed at promoting a change of regime in Baghdad."¹⁸¹ George W. Bush, who would order the invasion of Iraq that his father refused to do, told a family friend in 1998 that his father had "made a mistake not going into Iraq

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 19.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 24.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 25.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 25.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 19.

¹⁸⁰ Zalmay Khalilzad and Paul Wolfowitz, "We Must Lead the Way in Deposing Saddam," *Washington Post*, November 9, 1997, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1997/11/09/we-must-lead-the-way-in-deposing-saddam/e7109ca0-6545-459e-b6e2-fd29b7e44e09/>.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

when he had an approval rating in the nineties. If I'm ever in the situation, I'll use it—I'll spend my political capital."¹⁸² The rumblings of Iraqi regime change began well before the hijacking of four passenger airlines spawned the global War on Terror.

The primary drivers of America's intervention strategy during the second Bush administration were a group of policymakers known as neoconservatives. Long before George W. Bush walked into the White House, neoconservatives in and around the government were campaigning against Saddam Hussein and supporting a strategy of regime change, including through the funding of Iraqi opposition groups like the Iraqi National Congress.¹⁸³ Most prominently, this cadre of executive branch elites included Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, and Vice President Dick Cheney. In describing these "national security conservatives," Bob Woodward wrote that these policymakers were obsessed with the threat that Saddam Hussein posed to the U.S. and to the world and argued that any serious counterterrorism policy must include the Iraqi president as a target.¹⁸⁴ Richard Clarke, a former U.S. counterterrorism official, described rationales for the 2003 invasion attributed to Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, and the president, including the intention "to clean up the mess left by the first Bush administration when, in 1991, it let Saddam Hussein consolidate power and slaughter opponents after the first U.S.-Iraq war."¹⁸⁵

Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld did not keep his preference for regime change a secret. As a member of the neoconservative group, the Project for the New American Century, he signed on to a letter to President Clinton which called for a new strategy toward Iraq, one that involved

¹⁸² Robert Draper, *Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush* (New York: Free Press, 2007), 173.

¹⁸³ Joyce Battle, "THE IRAQ WAR -- PART I: The U.S. Prepares for Conflict, 2001," *The National Security Archive*, George Washington University, September 22, 2010, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB326/index.htm>.

¹⁸⁴ Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 60.

¹⁸⁵ Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America's War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004): 265.

“removing Saddam Hussein and his regime from power.”¹⁸⁶ In a memorandum to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice on July 27, 2001, Rumsfeld discussed background information on Iraq and policy proposals toward Saddam’s regime, along with his comments. He warned of Iraqi WMDs, writing that “the risks of a serious regime-change policy must be weighed against the certainty of the danger of an increasingly bold and nuclear-armed Saddam in the near future.”¹⁸⁷ He continued, suggesting that “if Saddam’s regime were ousted, we would have a much-improved position in the region and elsewhere.”¹⁸⁸ Notes from a November 27, 2001, meeting between Secretary Rumsfeld and CENTCOM Commander General Tommy Franks show the priority given to regime change in the administration’s Iraq intervention strategy. The document, which was prepared with the assistance of senior Defense Department officials, including Paul Wolfowitz, lists the steps necessary for “building momentum for regime change.”¹⁸⁹ Moreover, under the heading of “decapitation of government,” Rumsfeld had written “do early.”¹⁹⁰ In a memorandum to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on August 12, 2002, Rumsfeld asked for a proposal to train opposition groups within Iraq “to enable them to be prepared to participate in operations aimed at replacing the Saddam Hussein regime.”¹⁹¹

¹⁸⁶ “Were 1998 Memos a Blueprint for War?” *ABC News*, January 6, 2006, <https://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/story?id=128491&page=1>. Other administration officials signed the letter, including Paul Wolfowitz. Dick Cheney was also member of PNAC, but his signature did not appear on the 1998 open letter.

¹⁸⁷ Donald Rumsfeld to Condoleezza Rice, “Iraq,” memorandum. July 27, 2001, THE IRAQ WAR -- PART I: The U.S. Prepares for Conflict, 2001, *The National Security Archive*, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB326/doc06.pdf>.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ Notes, U.S. Department of Defense Notes from Donald Rumsfeld, November 27, 2001, THE IRAQ WAR – PART I: The U.S. Prepares for Conflict, 2001, *The National Security Archive*, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB326/doc08.pdf>.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Secretary of Defense to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, “Planning Guidance for Iraqi Opposition Training,” memorandum. August 12, 2002, The Rumsfeld Papers, <http://library.rumsfeld.com>.

Paul Wolfowitz, who served under the first President Bush as the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, had long championed Iraqi regime change before the 2003 invasion. Wolfowitz was an outspoken critic of the decision to leave Saddam in power following the end of combat operations in the First Gulf War.¹⁹² In a 1992 “Defense Planning Guidance” document leaked to the New York Times, authored by Wolfowitz, the case was made for “using military force, if necessary, to prevent the proliferation of nuclear weapons...in such countries as North Korea, Iraq,” among others.¹⁹³ Wolfowitz lambasted the Clinton administration’s policy toward Iraq in 1996, arguing that Iraq is crucial to American national security and lamenting that the “U.S. has virtually abandoned its commitment to protect a besieged people from a bloodthirsty dictator.”¹⁹⁴ Criticizing the Clinton White House for not protecting the Iraqi opposition in the northern parts of the country, he wrote that “it will be much more difficult to go beyond a containment strategy” but “no less necessary.”¹⁹⁵ In the 1997 *Washington Post* opinion piece written with Khalilzad, Wolfowitz argued for a reevaluation of policy toward Iraq to include the “removal of Saddam’s regime.”¹⁹⁶ Khalilzad and Wolfowitz claimed that a new strategy “combined with concrete measures to get rid of Saddam will restore our credibility” with Iraqis and in the region more broadly.¹⁹⁷ Clarke recalled that Wolfowitz “had urged a focus on Iraqi-sponsored terrorism” in the administration’s early meetings on terrorism.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹² Woodward, *Bush at War*, 83.

¹⁹³ Patrick E. Tyler, “U.S. Strategy Calls for Insuring No Rivals Develop,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/03/08/world/us-strategy-plan-calls-for-insuring-no-rivals-develop.html>.

¹⁹⁴ Paul Wolfowitz, “Clinton’s Bay of Pigs,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 27, 1996, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB843775850211826000>.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Khalilzad and Wolfowitz, “We Must Lead.”

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004): 264.

Unlike his fellow neoconservatives, Vice President Dick Cheney was not immediately convinced to support regime change in Iraq following the First Gulf War. In a 1995 interview with PBS Frontline, Cheney remarked that he “was not an enthusiast about getting U.S. forces and going into Iraq.”¹⁹⁹ He continued, “the idea of going into Baghdad, for example, or trying to topple the regime wasn’t anything I was enthusiastic about.”²⁰⁰ However, according to Bob Woodward, the incoming Vice President had changed his views on Iraq upon entering the White House. In a message to Clinton’s outgoing defense secretary, Cheney stressed the importance of briefing George W. Bush on “Iraq and different options.”²⁰¹ As head of the Pentagon during the first Bush administration, Cheney “harbored a deep sense of unfinished business about Iraq.”²⁰²

Despite his 1998 harsh comments, Bush had not made up his mind to immediately pursue the ousting of Saddam in Iraq. During the 2000 presidential campaign, then Governor Bush “gave no indication that he or his advisors were planning to remove Saddam via a military invasion.”²⁰³ In an interview with PBS, Kenneth Pollack, an NSC staffer from 1995-96 and again from 1999-2001, maintained that regime change in Iraq was not the original policy of the young George W. Bush administration.²⁰⁴ According to Pollack, prior to the September 11 attacks, “the tide had swung very much against that group of far-right conservatives who had been arguing for Iraq.”²⁰⁵ However, after 9/11, the neoconservative hawks within the administration seized upon the new war on terrorism “to resurrect their policy of trying to go after Saddam Hussein and a regime

¹⁹⁹ Richard Cheney, Interview by Frontline, PBS, 1995, accessed March 25, 2022, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/cheney/1.html>.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 9.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Perry, et al., *Operation IRAQI FREEDOM: Decisive War, Elusive Peace*, 26.

²⁰⁴ Kenneth Pollack, Interview by Frontline, PBS, January 4, 2003, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/iraq/interviews/pollack.html>.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

change in Iraq.”²⁰⁶ For example, Clarke recalled a brief meeting with the president on the evening of September 12, 2001, where Bush testily demanded his advisers “look into Iraq, Saddam.”²⁰⁷ One NSC staff member lamented, “Wolfowitz got to him.”²⁰⁸ The 2001 terrorist attacks fundamentally transformed the foreign policy objectives of the Bush administration, placing regime change in Iraq near the very top of the list.

Yet not all top administration officials were championing a unilateral regime change in Iraq. In an October 29, 2002, memo to Cheney, Powell, Rumsfeld and others, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice listed strategy objectives toward Iraq, including the need to “secure UNSC approval if possible.”²⁰⁹ Multilateralism was also an element of the strategy, as Rice suggested that the administration “pursue our goals and objectives with a coalition of committed countries.”²¹⁰ Dennis Ross, an official in both the first Bush and Clinton administrations, described the influence of Secretary of State Colin Powell within the administration’s debate on Iraq. He told PBS that “in terms of the shaping of the approach to Iraq, [Powell] has played a significant role. Going to the Security Council was clearly his advice and his suggestion.”²¹¹ He continued, “Getting a Security Council resolution, I think, was obviously where he extended enormous efforts.”²¹² To the chagrin of some of the more hawkish members of the administration, in his September 12, 2002, speech to the UN General Assembly, President Bush told the world that the

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Clarke, *Against All Enemies*, 32.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Condoleezza Rice to Richard Cheney et al., “Principals’ Committee Review of Iraq Policy Paper,” memorandum. 29 October 2002, The Rumsfeld Papers.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Dennis Ross, Interview by Frontline, *PBS*, January 27, 2003, accessed March 28, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/iraq/interviews/ross.html>.

²¹² Ibid.

U.S. “will work with the UN Security Council to meet our common challenge” and will work with the body “for the necessary resolutions.”²¹³

Ultimately, the U.S. failed to secure a second UN resolution to authorize force against Iraq.²¹⁴ Despite this, U.S. and coalition forces began striking selected military targets in Iraq’s capital in the early hours of March 20, 2003.²¹⁵ The operation in Iraq did not establish a new democratic American ally or secure a friendly source of natural resources. Today, almost twenty years after the president declared an official end to combat operations in Iraq on that aircraft carrier in San Diego, roughly 2,500 troops remain in a ravaged and devastated Iraq.²¹⁶

R2P’s Test in Libya, 2011

In 2011, a revolutionary spirit swept through the Middle East and North Africa, toppling regimes from Tunisia to Egypt and igniting uprisings in states including Syria and Yemen. Libya was not immune to the popular sentiment. After the Qaddafi regime brutally repressed peaceful protestors and resorted to violence against civilians, debate about a potential international response, in accordance with the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine, began to grow in the UN Security Council.²¹⁷ In response to these atrocities, in February 2011, the Council passed Resolution 1970, imposing sanctions on Qaddafi’s government and banning specific individuals from travel.²¹⁸ In March, the Council went even further, adopting Resolution 1973, which closed

²¹³ “Text: Bush’s Speech to U.N. on Iraq,” *New York Times*, September 12, 2002, <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/09/12/politics/text-bushs-speech-to-un-on-iraq.html>.

²¹⁴ Perry, et al., *Operation IRAQI FREEDOM: Decisive War, Elusive Peace*, 29.

²¹⁵ David E. Sanger and John F. Burns, “Threats and Responses: The White House; Bush Orders Start of War on Iraq; Missiles Apparently Miss Hussein,” *New York Times*, March 20, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/03/20/world/threats-responses-white-house-bush-orders-start-war-iraq-missiles-apparently.html>.

²¹⁶ Trita Parsi and Adam N. Weinstein, “Why Are American Troops Still in Iraq?” *New York Times*, February 10, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/10/opinion/biden-iraq-military.html>.

²¹⁷ Veldin Kadić, “Humanitarian Intervention in Libya as an Obstacle to the Humanitarian Intervention in Syria: Geopolitical Lessons Learned,” *Democracy & Security in Southeastern Europe* (2020): 71.

²¹⁸ Christopher Zambakari, “The Misguided and Mismanaged Intervention in Libya: Consequences for Peace,” *African Security Review* 25, no. 1 (March 2016): 45.

Libyan airspace and “authorized Member States...to take all necessary measures to protect civilians under threat of attack.”²¹⁹ Following Resolution 1973, and despite ongoing debate within the Obama administration, the president “ultimately agreed to military action in Libya.”²²⁰

Throughout the various pro-democracy uprisings that swept across the Middle East in 2011, the U.S. remained largely inactive, disinterested in the prospect of further entrenchment in the region.²²¹ President Obama was initially reluctant to involve America in yet another conflict in the Middle East, despite the increasing relevance of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine to the Libyan crisis.²²² However, the civil war proved to be a turning point in Obama’s foreign policy, shifting the attention away from attending to the previous administration’s mistakes and toward the rights-based multilateralism laid out in his National Security Strategy.²²³ Libya became a test of this dedication to coalition building and human rights as the news from inside the country became more and more dire.²²⁴

The various uprisings during the Arab Spring divided administration officials, especially when determining American policy toward the unrest in Libya. Skeptics of intervention included White House advisors and the top officials at the Pentagon, who cited the protracted conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan as enough reason to refrain from action.²²⁵ Opponents of U.S. intervention included Defense Secretary Robert Gates, National Security Advisor Thomas Donilon, and

²¹⁹ “Security Council Approves ‘No-Fly Zone’ over Libya, Authorizing ‘All Necessary Measures’ to Protect Civilians, by Vote of 10 in Favour with 5 Abstentions,” *United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases*, March 17, 2011, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2011/sc10200.doc.htm>.

²²⁰ Tom F.A. Watts and Rubrick Biegon, “Revisiting the remoteness of remote warfare: US military intervention in Libya during Obama’s presidency,” *Defence Studies* 21, no.4 (Dec 2021): 519.

²²¹ Thomas H. Henrikson, *Cycles in US Foreign Policy since the Cold War* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillian, 2017), 20.

²²² *Ibid.*, 266.

²²³ Michael Hastings, “Inside Obama’s War Room,” *Rolling Stone*, October 13, 2011, <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/inside-obamas-war-room-238074/>.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

²²⁵ Mikael Blomdahl, “Interacting Interests: Explaining President Obama’s Libyan Decision,” *European Journal of American Studies* 13, no.2 (Summer 2018): 4.

Obama's chief counterterrorism advisor, John Brennan.²²⁶ They argued for a more cautious approach, claiming that support of the Libyan uprising was not material to the country's national security.²²⁷ Other officials in the administration were arguing for a different, more hands-on course of action. These advisors—among them U.S. Ambassador to the UN Susan Rice, Special Assistant to the President Samantha Power, and, ultimately, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton—championed American intervention to stop the humanitarian crisis and protect civilians.²²⁸

Secretary Gates was one of the loudest critics of American involvement in the Libyan civil war. Vehemently opposed to further U.S. military action in the region, he worried that a third war would overburden the defense department's resources.²²⁹ During an early March congressional hearing, he warned lawmakers about the implications of establishing a no-fly zone in Libya, explaining that it “would entail bombing Libya,” an operation that “would require more airplanes than are available from a single American aircraft carrier.”²³⁰ He also referred to calls for U.S. intervention as “loose talk.”²³¹ Gates wrote in his memoir that he was extremely concerned about “how overstretched and tired our military was, and the possibility of a protracted conflict in Libya.”²³² In an interview with ABC News on March 27, 2011, Gates maintained that Libya under Qaddafi “did not pose a threat to the United States” before American intervention.²³³

²²⁶ Helene Cooper and Steven Lee Myers, “Obama Takes Hard Line With Libya After Shift by Clinton,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/africa/19policy.html>.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Hastings, “Inside Obama's War Room.”

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ “Gates: Libyan no-fly zone would require attack,” CBS News, March 2, 2011, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/gates-libyan-no-fly-zone-would-require-attack/>.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2014): 511, Kindle.

²³³ Joshua Miller, “Defense Secretary: Libya Did Not Pose Threat to U.S., Was Not ‘Vital National Interest’ to Intervene,” ABC News, March 27, 2011, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/defense-secretary-libya-pose-threat-us-vital-national/story?id=13231987>.

Brennan joined the defense secretary in his opposition to U.S. interference in the Libyan conflict. Brennan specifically argued against U.S. support of the anti-Qaddafi forces, worried about potential terrorist links between the rebels and al Qaeda.²³⁴ Tom Donilon, together with Gates, advocated for a much more careful strategy to the Arab Spring uprisings, and Libya in particular, advising the president of the potential risks, including “the cost, logistical complications and political blow-back of further U.S. military involvement in such a volatile part of the world.”²³⁵ Secretary Clinton originally sided with Gates, Brennan, and Donilon, reluctant to support a potentially open-ended intervention operation in Libya, concerned with the potential damage to America’s reputation.²³⁶

Ambassador Rice’s worldview has been profoundly shaped by her experience with the Clinton administration, where she served as a staffer on the National Security Council during the Rwandan genocide in 1994.²³⁷ In a June 2009 speech, at the beginning of her tenure as U.S. Ambassador to the UN, Rice told the International Peace Institute in Vienna that the U.S. “welcomes” the R2P doctrine, and that it is “committed as well to doing its part to strengthen the international human rights architecture.”²³⁸ Speaking of her personal beliefs, she said that “the Responsibility to Protect is a duty that I feel deeply,” continuing, “I believe we must be voices for action in the face of genocide and mass atrocities, even if we are lonely ones.”²³⁹

²³⁴ Cooper and Myers, “Obama Takes Hard Line.”

²³⁵ Glenn Thrush, “‘No-fly’ win for lame-duck Clinton,” *Politico*, March 17, 2011, <https://www.politico.com/story/2011/03/no-fly-win-for-lame-duck-clinton-051515>.

²³⁶ Blomdahl, “Interacting Interests,” 5.

²³⁷ Scott Wilson, “National security team shuffle may signal more activist stance at White House,” *Washington Post*, June 5, 2013, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/tom-donilon-resigning-as-national-security-adviser-susan-rice-to-replace-him/2013/06/05/b296f36a-cdd3-11e2-8f6b-67f40e176f03_story.html.

²³⁸ Susan Rice, “UN Security Council and the Responsibility to Protect,” Transcript of speech delivered at International Peace Institute, Vienna, June 15, 2009, <https://awpc.cattcenter.iastate.edu/2017/03/21/un-security-council-and-the-responsibility-to-protect-june-15-2009/>.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*

During President Obama’s first term, Samantha Power served on the National Security Council staff and proved herself to be an outspoken voice in favor of humanitarian intervention. In her memoir, she depicted Qaddafi’s Libya as “one of the most repressive states in the world” where “persecution, torture, and summary executions” of political opponents were commonplace.²⁴⁰ Power, who reported on the atrocities committed during the Bosnian civil war as a journalist, often drew comparisons between those humanitarian outrages and the chilling reports coming out of Libya by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.²⁴¹ She described a March 15 National Security Council meeting regarding the Libyan civil war where the president’s advisors briefed him about potential U.S. actions. Power advocated for “a civilian protection mission along the lines of what Susan [Rice] had proposed,”²⁴² which included “striking Qaddafi’s forces and the land-based weapons they were using to attack civilians.”²⁴³

Despite her initial reluctance, Clinton soon changed her mind after allying with top administration officials also arguing for intervention.²⁴⁴ The secretary of state reportedly reconsidered her position during an overseas trip, where she learned of broad international support of military action in Libya, particularly by Arab governments in the region.²⁴⁵ According to Power’s recollection, Secretary Clinton, who had met with the Libyan opposition leadership earlier that day, “threw her considerable influence behind Susan’s recommendation” during the March 15 NSC meeting.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁰ Samantha Power, *The Education of an Idealist: A Memoir* (New York: Harper Collins, 2021), 289, Kindle.

²⁴¹ *Ibid*, 294.

²⁴² *Ibid*, 301.

²⁴³ *Ibid*, 298.

²⁴⁴ Helene Cooper and Steven Lee Myers, “Obama Takes Hard Line With Libya After Shift by Clinton,” *New York Times*, March 18, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/19/world/africa/19policy.html>.

²⁴⁵ Cooper and Myers, “Obama Takes Hard Line.”

²⁴⁶ Power, *The Education of an Idealist*, 298.

As of March 9, the administration remained steadfast in its position, only committed to providing humanitarian aid to civilians in Libya.²⁴⁷ However, around the time of Clinton’s trip to Paris, she and the other officials had persuaded the president to step in.²⁴⁸ The pivotal shift in intervention policy occurred after the March 15 NSC meeting²⁴⁹ and rested upon the coalition of Secretary Clinton, NSC aide Samantha Power, and UN Ambassador Susan Rice.²⁵⁰ The president appeared to be preoccupied with the humanitarian costs of inaction, asking his advisors “to gauge the likelihood of mass killings” if the U.S. and others stood on the sidelines as Qaddafi launched his counteroffensive.²⁵¹ After the first meeting was dismissed, Obama reconvened his principals to discuss concrete policy options later that night.²⁵² Ambassador Rice revealed to Power in a phone call that the president had sided with the interventionists, conditioned on the passage of a Security Council resolution.²⁵³ Gates described a March 17 meeting with the president where he justified the decision to intervene, arguing that the U.S. “couldn’t stand idly by in the face of a potential humanitarian disaster.”²⁵⁴ In remarks to the media the following day, marking the passage of Resolution 1973, President Obama informed the nation of the administration’s dedication to “protecting innocent civilians with Libya, and holding the Qaddafi regime accountable” and described American leadership in the coalition as “essential.”²⁵⁵

²⁴⁷ Blomdahl, “Interacting Interests,” 5.

²⁴⁸ Cooper and Myers, “Obama Takes Hard Line.”

²⁴⁹ Power, *The Education of an Idealist*, 296.

²⁵⁰ Cooper and Myers, “Obama Takes Hard Line.”

²⁵¹ Power, *The Education of an Idealist*, 299.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 302.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ Gates, *Duty*, 518.

²⁵⁵ “Remarks by the President on the Situation in Libya,” Office of the Press Secretary, March 18, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/18/remarks-President-situation-libya>.

After the decision had been made, the administration moved quickly, with U.S. forces targeting the air defenses of Qaddafi's regime on March 19.²⁵⁶ The United States soon turned over command of the bombing campaign to coalition forces under NATO, in a mission codenamed "Operation Unified Protector."²⁵⁷ In support of Operation Unified Protector, the president also allegedly supported the deployment of "covert military support to Libyan opposition groups."²⁵⁸ While administration officials declared the intervention "resoundingly successful," as it removed Qaddafi from power while keeping American troops off the ground, "the country's security situation quickly deteriorated," and never recovered.²⁵⁹

Non-intervention in Iraq, Bosnia, and Syria

No Regime Change in Iraq, 1991

As combat operations concluded in February 1991, the Bush White House refrained from action not outlined in the resolutions passed by the Security Council. The president did not order a full-scale invasion, nor did U.S. and coalition forces depose Hussein or occupy Iraq.²⁶⁰ Furthermore, instead of destroying the Iraqi army and the Iraqi Republican Guard, the administration terminated Operation Desert Storm, leaving the military largely intact and Saddam in power,²⁶¹ a decision the president's son would have to reckon with during his own stint as commander-in-chief twelve years later.

During an exchange with reporters on August 11, 1990, Bush was asked about what measures the administration was willing to take to fulfill its objectives in the Gulf, "including

²⁵⁶ Blomdahl, "Interacting Interests," 8; Watts and Biegon, "Revisiting," 520.

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 520.

²⁵⁸ Ibid.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

²⁶⁰ Henrikson, *Cycles*, 13.

²⁶¹ Ashley Cox, "Wilsonian Ambitions for American Engagement in the First Gulf War," *History Compass* 15, no.1 (2017): 5.

overthrowing Saddam Hussein.”²⁶² Bush was reserved in his response, replying that he would “just leave it sit out there, and everybody can figure it out.”²⁶³ Another reporter pushed for clarification, asking if the U.S. was “prepared in any way” to support the ousting of Saddam as Iraqi president, to which Bush replied in the negative.²⁶⁴ He did, however, express support for Iraqi opposition to “do something about” Saddam leaving so Iraq could “live peacefully in the community of nations.”²⁶⁵ In a press conference later that same month, the president reiterated the administration’s support of a potential internal rebellion in Iraq, telling the press that “it wouldn’t disappoint me if the Iraqis got up and said, look, this man is our problem.”²⁶⁶

According to General Powell, the Bush administration “never had a plan that said we were going to go to Baghdad and actually remove this guy from power...because we had no international authority for that, we had no agreement with the coalition.”²⁶⁷ Bush and Scowcroft wrote that regime change was not a viable option after Desert Storm, as it “would have violated our guideline about not changing objectives in midstream” and “would have incurred incalculable human and political costs.”²⁶⁸ Furthermore, they argued that in the “new world order,” an American occupation of Iraq “would have destroyed the precedent of international response to aggression that we hoped to establish” after the end of the Cold War.²⁶⁹

²⁶² “Remarks and an Exchange With Reporters on the Persian Gulf Crisis,” Public Papers, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, August 11, 1990, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2158>.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid.

²⁶⁶ “The President’s News Conference on the Persian Gulf Crisis,” Public Papers, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, August 30, 1990, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/2189>.

²⁶⁷ Colin Powell, Interview by Frontline, *PBS*, 1995, accessed April 2, 2022, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/gulf/oral/cheney/1.html>.

²⁶⁸ Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 869.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

Top officials at the defense department defended the move to retreat, claiming that attacking the fleeing Iraqi soldiers would “sully the American-led victory and poison the postwar environment.”²⁷⁰ General Powell argued, “we don’t want to be seen as killing for the sake of killing.”²⁷¹ Defense Secretary Cheney echoed this view, telling PBS in an interview that “there was a limit to how long you could continue the bloodshed without having it look as though we were asking our troops to do something we probably shouldn’t ask them to do.”²⁷²

The decision to withdraw coalition troops and leave Saddam in power was not universally welcomed. Zalmay Khalilzad and Paul Wolfowitz, who both served in the department of defense during the first Bush administration, argued in a 1997 op-ed that U.S. policy should include regime change in Iraq.²⁷³ In an April 1992 article, Angelo Codevilla lambasted Bush’s decision to leave the Iraqi president in power, criticizing the U.S. for leaving Saddam “well-positioned to resume both his military and his political threats.”²⁷⁴ Others were outraged at decisions to leave Saddam’s elite Republican Guard intact²⁷⁵ and let the Iraqi military “retain helicopter flights ‘to carry officials’ because of the bombed out bridges and roads” following the end of Operation Desert Storm.²⁷⁶ Richard Clarke, who served in Bush’s state department, argued that coalition forces “should have continued the war for a day or week to destroy the Republican Guard.”²⁷⁷ Furthermore, the helicopters retained by Iraqi forces were subsequently used by Saddam to suppress uprisings and attack civilians.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁰ Henrikson, *Cycles*, 70.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

²⁷² Cheney, Interview by Frontline.

²⁷³ Khalilzad and Wolfowitz, “We Must Lead.”

²⁷⁴ Angelo Codevilla, “Magnificent, But Was It War?” *Commentary*, April 1992, <https://www.commentary.org/articles/angelo-codevilla/magnificent-but-was-it-war/>.

²⁷⁵ Clarke, *Against All Enemies*, 66.

²⁷⁶ Henrikson, *Cycles*, 72.

²⁷⁷ Clarke, *Against All Enemies*, 66.

²⁷⁸ Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 870.

Instead of marching into Iraq and imposing regime change, the U.S. bolstered its military presence in neighboring states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar and instituted a no-fly zone over parts of Iraqi territory to protect Kurdish fighters that had allied with the coalition.²⁷⁹ While some praised the Bush administration's constraint, others criticized the president for not going further and "accused him of not finishing the job."²⁸⁰ Despite the loud calls for Hussein's removal, even from within Bush's own administration, the U.S. left him in power to counterbalance against Iran.²⁸¹ The no-fly zone remained in effect until George W. Bush ordered the invasion of Iraq in May 2003.²⁸²

"Not America's Problem," Reluctance in the Balkans, 1990-94

Reluctance to wade into the complex imbroglio developing in the Balkans was not merely an American phenomenon. Major powers in Europe, as well as the United States, adopted a piecemeal approach, and as the conflict grew and became more devastating, the West "never stopped to alter their original reluctance...or formulate a policy."²⁸³ Yugoslavia, and its subsequent disintegration, came to be viewed as a European problem, with the U.S. deferring to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) "once U.S. foreign policy placed Yugoslavia in the same category as Eastern Europe and dropped its traditional security priority."²⁸⁴

As early as 1989, the incoming U.S. ambassador to Yugoslavia, Warren Zimmerman, and the then-deputy secretary of state, Lawrence Eagleburger, "concluded that with the end of the Cold War Yugoslavia's 'former geopolitical significance' had vanished."²⁸⁵ However, Yugoslavia's

²⁷⁹ Henrikson, *Cycles*, 13.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 71.

²⁸¹ *Ibid*, 71.

²⁸² *Ibid*, 13.

²⁸³ Susan L. Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy: Chaos and Dissolution After the Cold War* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1995): 147. Google e-book.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 151.

²⁸⁵ Larres, "Bloody as Hell," 183.

perceived import in the eyes of American policymakers had been declining long before then, since Tito's death in 1980.²⁸⁶ The first years of the George H.W. Bush administration were dominated by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and potential instability in Moscow, with very little attention spared to the developing crisis in Yugoslavia. The Balkans policy of the first Bush White House "reflected the belief held in European circles that if the Yugoslavs could not resolve their own quarrels, there was little the United States could do."²⁸⁷

Flying high after the relatively uncontroversial success in the Gulf War, the Bush administration was uninterested in getting involved in the complex situation in Yugoslavia, viewing it as a "'regional dispute' and a civil war rather than a conflict of global importance."²⁸⁸ While some officials in the State Department favored involvement in the emerging crisis, other administration advisors on the National Security Council and at the Pentagon were staunchly opposed.²⁸⁹ A Croatian government official remembered an interaction with National Security Advisor Scowcroft where he was told "in September 1990 that the U.S. administration 'supported the unity of Yugoslavia at any cost.'"²⁹⁰ Secretary Baker described U.S. policy toward Yugoslavia as based on four principles: democratization, human rights, marketization, and "above all, unity."²⁹¹ However, as the crisis escalated, U.S. officials were forced to shift foreign policy accordingly.

In a June 1991 trip to the Balkans, Secretary of State James Baker warned the leaders of the Slovenian and Croatian republics that the U.S. would not recognize or offer economic

²⁸⁶ Ibid.

²⁸⁷ Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy*, 155.

²⁸⁸ Larres, "'Bloody as Hell,'" 187.

²⁸⁹ Woodward, *Balkan Tragedy*, 174.

²⁹⁰ Ibid, 188.

²⁹¹ Ibid, 188-89.

assistance if they declared independence from Yugoslavia.²⁹² In remarks to the media on November 8, 1991, President Bush applauded the European Commission for taking a leadership role in Yugoslavia, and maintained that he had yet to make a final decision on the administration's official policy.²⁹³ By early April the next year, however, the situation in the Balkans had worsened to the point of warranting more U.S. attention. On April 7, the U.S. offered official diplomatic recognition of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, and Slovenia and announced the lifting of sanctions on the new states.²⁹⁴ In an official statement, Bush expressed support for the Cyrus Vance peace plan and deployment of UN peacekeepers and argued that the EC Peace Conference was the "indispensable forum" for conflict resolution.²⁹⁵ At the July 1992 meeting of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and in the face of calls for more action from the Bosnian president, Secretary Baker reaffirmed the official position, stating pointedly that U.S. involvement was limited to the provision of humanitarian aid and the enforcement of UN sanctions.²⁹⁶ That was as far as the Bush administration was willing to go to intervene in the Bosnian conflict. According to a September article that same year, after a meeting with Defense Secretary Dick Cheney, European officials said he gave "vague, noncommittal responses" in response to pleas for more

²⁹² Thomas L. Friedman, "Baker Urges End to Yugoslav Rift," *New York Times*, June 22, 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/06/22/world/baker-urges-end-to-yugoslav-rift.html>.

²⁹³ "The President's News Conference in Rome, Italy," Public Papers, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, November 8, 1991, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/3602>.

²⁹⁴ "Statement on United States Recognition of the Former Yugoslav Republics," Public Papers, George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, April 7, 1992, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/4152>.

²⁹⁵ Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Don Oberdorfer and Marc Fisher, "Bush Turns Aside Bosnian Plea for Military Intervention," *Washington Post*, July 10, 1992, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/07/10/bush-turns-aside-bosnian-plea-for-military-intervention/36faf052-3d17-4f94-8c83-1f225bfded5e/>.

American involvement.²⁹⁷ It left them to conclude that “the Bush administration had decided to avoid any military action in Yugoslavia” before the next election.²⁹⁸

Candidate Clinton made a point of distinguishing himself from his Republican rival on the issue of Bosnia during the 1992 presidential election. He criticized the administration for not taking a more forceful stance, arguing that “if Serbia continued to violate the cease-fire agreement in Bosnia, ‘the United States should take the lead in seeking U.N. Security Council authorization for air strikes’” and that the U.S. “should be prepared to lend appropriate military support to that operation.”²⁹⁹ However, after his ascendancy to commander-in-chief, Clinton softened his position toward the violence in the Balkans. Much like his predecessor, he soon determined that the conflict in the former Yugoslavia was not critical to U.S. national interests and continued the Bush policy of deferring to European policies.³⁰⁰

The hawkish position on Bosnia during the campaign can be attributed to two of Clinton’s foreign policy advisors, Sandy Berger and Anthony Lake.³⁰¹ During the administration, Lake found a kindred spirit in Secretary Albright, who also favored U.S. military intervention.³⁰² In a leaked memorandum, it was revealed that Albright had “asked Clinton to use air power to prevent any further Serb advances” in March 1993.³⁰³ Unfortunately for Lake and Albright, the opponents of military engagement won the day during the first years of Clinton’s presidency. Colin Powell,

²⁹⁷ Jim Hoagl, “An October Surprise? Not in This Election Year,” *Washington Post*, September 29, 1992, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/opinions/1992/09/29/an-october-surprise-not-in-this-election-year/0f2aee10-cba1-4df1-849c-015e5ab2398b/>.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

²⁹⁹ E.J. Dionne Jr., “Clinton Turns Sights to Foreign Policy,” *Washington Post*, July 29, 1992, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1992/07/29/clinton-turns-sights-to-foreign-policy/af5bda94-0d08-43fa-8ea9-54e6010579b2/>.

³⁰⁰ Larres, “‘Bloody as Hell,’” 196.

³⁰¹ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, 82.

³⁰² Ibid, 82-83.

³⁰³ Larres, “‘Bloody as Hell,’” 197.

who retained his position as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff until September, was particularly influential with President Clinton. Powell, opposed to military involvement, frightened the president with the prospect of a long and drawn-out conflict and the requirement of at least 500,000 American troops.³⁰⁴ Lacking a clear consensus among his foreign policy advisors, President Clinton declined to make a final decision of strategy, and instead continued to follow Europe's lead.³⁰⁵

Despite the chilling reports emerging from the Balkan warzone, the Clinton White House had little interest in weighing into another humanitarian conflict. Stung by the disastrous operation with the UN in Somalia, the president was reluctant to commit more American troops abroad, even refusing to intervene to stop the genocide in Rwanda. It wasn't until the specter of more bloody conflict leading up to the expiration of the April 1994 ceasefire that Clinton's advisors lobbied in earnest for a shift in the administration's Bosnia policy. After the massacre in Srebrenica in July 1995, the pro-intervention faction in the administration won out, convincing the president to support Lake's "endgame strategy"³⁰⁶ and paving the way for the Dayton Accords.

Crossing the 'red line' in Syria, 2012

In March 2011, at the beginning of the Arab Spring, the demonstrations in Syria were largely characterized as small and peaceful in nature.³⁰⁷ They did not remain that way. Soon the protests spread across the country and even included Sunni Muslims, typically thought to be loyal to President Assad.³⁰⁸ Government forces began a brutal crackdown on the pro-democracy

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ Daalder, *Getting to Dayton*, 13.

³⁰⁶ Ibid, 111.

³⁰⁷ Henrikson, *Cycles*, 272.

³⁰⁸ Mark Landler, "Unrest in Syria and Jordan Poses New Test for U.S. Policy," *New York Times*, March 26, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/27/world/middleeast/27diplomacy.html>.

uprising, firing on civilians, leaving many dead and even more wounded.³⁰⁹ By the end of April, the White House had sanctioned three top officials in the Assad regime, but refrained from imposing the same punitive measures on the Syrian president, drawing a sharp distinction between this cautious approach and the more assertive stance toward Libya.³¹⁰

During a speech at the State Department on May 19, 2011, President Obama criticized the Assad government's response to the Arab Spring protests, condemning the regime for the "murder and mass arrests of its citizens" and praised the Syrian demonstrators as courageous.³¹¹ He also issued a stark warning: "President Assad now has a choice: He can lead that transition [to democracy], or get out of the way."³¹² With the R2P doctrine underpinning the U.S.-led intervention into Libya, it appeared as though the Obama administration was similarly poised to confront the Assad regime in Syria.

Despite the surface-level similarities, it became quite clear that the White House was charting a different course in dealing with the Assad regime as opposed to Qaddafi's government in Libya. Donilon, who opposed the U.S. intervention into Libya, also cautioned against interference in the Syrian civil war, believing a similar military operation against the Assad regime to be unavailable or ill-advised.³¹³ According to the Washington Post, Obama's national security advisor was hesitant to paint the Arab Spring uprisings with broad strokes, telling the paper that the U.S. "should be careful not to take actions now that it might regret down the road" in an ever-

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Mark Landler, "U.S. Moves Cautiously Against Syrian Leaders," *New York Times*, April 29, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/30/world/middleeast/30policy.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

³¹¹ "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa," Office of the Press Secretary, May 19, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ David Ignatius, "Tom Donilon's Arab Spring challenge," *Washington Post*, April 26, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/tom_donilons_arab_spring_challenge/2011/04/26/AFWVE2sE_story.html.

evolving situation.³¹⁴ Before the August 21, 2013, attack in Ghouta, the president was quite hesitant to send military forces to Syria, especially as the situation in Libya continued to deteriorate.³¹⁵ Power remembered President Obama as preoccupied with the lack of multilateral support for the use of force and the potential of a Russian veto on the Security Council rendering any resolution moot.³¹⁶

When asked about the deteriorating situation in Syria on August 20, 2012, President Obama told the press that “a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized.”³¹⁷ He maintained that the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime “would change my calculations significantly” about U.S. military involvement in Syria.³¹⁸ Despite this statement, the Obama administration took no military action after the Assad regime began small-scale chemical attacks on civilians beginning in 2012 and into early 2013.³¹⁹

Power advocated for U.S. intervention after the first signs of the Assad regime deploying chemical weapons against civilians were confirmed by American intelligence.³²⁰ Ben Rhodes, Obama’s deputy national security advisor, fought alongside Power for intervention into the Syrian civil war. He argued that “if we thought it was worth tipping the balance against Assad, we should be debating whether to strike his regime directly.”³²¹ He told the president during a meeting that

³¹⁴ Ibid.

³¹⁵ Power, *The Education of an Idealist*, 367.

³¹⁶ Ibid.

³¹⁷ “Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps,” Office of the Press Secretary, August 20, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/20/remarks-president-white-house-press-corps>.

³¹⁸ Ibid.

³¹⁹ Wyn Bowen, Jeffery W. Knopf, and Matthew Moran, “The Obama Administration and Syrian Chemical Weapons: Deterrence, Compellence, and the Limits of the “Resolve plus Bombs” Formula,” *Security Studies* 29, no.5 (2020): 798.

³²⁰ Power, *The Education of an Idealist*, 369.

³²¹ Ben Rhodes, *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House* (New York: Random House, 2018), 198.

“if things kept deteriorating...we should ‘consider bombing Assad’s runways’ or...consider ‘limited strikes against some regime infrastructure.’”³²²

Nearly a year after the issuance of the “red line,” on August 30, 2013, the White House released a statement, declaring that the government “assessed with high confidence that the Syrian government carried out a chemical weapons attack in the Damascus suburbs” days before on August 21.³²³ After Assad’s sarin gas attack, positions on possible U.S. military intervention within the administration hardened. According to Power, “officials who had previously argued against using military force in Syria were now in full agreement” with the president’s new forceful position.³²⁴ President Obama had decided that the cost of inaction in the face of the heinous chemical weapons attack was far greater than the potential consequences of military involvement.³²⁵

In the days following the chemical assault, Obama met with his advisors and devised plans for limited military strikes against Assad’s forces.³²⁶ However, the presence of UN investigators in Syria posed a problem. Gathering evidence from previous alleged chemical weapons attacks, the UN team was still in-country, investigating the recent attack in Ghouta.³²⁷ With the UN Secretary-General refusing to pull the inspectors out, President Obama’s planned strikes would have to wait.³²⁸ Unfortunately for the proponents of action, the delay proved to be fatal to the president’s resolve.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ “Government Assessment of the Syrian Government’s Use of Chemical Weapons on August 21, 2013,” Office of the Press Secretary, August 30, 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30/government-assessment-syrian-government-s-use-chemical-weapons-august-21>.

³²⁴ Power, *The Education of an Idealist*, 365.

³²⁵ Ibid, 369.

³²⁶ Ibid, 371.

³²⁷ Ibid, 372.

³²⁸ Ibid, 373.

On March 30, less than a week after the attack, Obama relayed to his national security team that he was uncomfortable pursuing military intervention without prior congressional authorization.³²⁹ Recalling a conversation she had had with Obama’s chief of staff, Susan Rice was shocked that the president had reneged on his decision to order missile strikes against the Assad regime, instead deciding to ask for a resolution in Congress.³³⁰ According to Rice, following the regime’s use of sarin gas on civilians, “almost all the NSC principals believed we needed to act militarily” against Syria.³³¹ Rice claimed that at a late August meeting, “the president had approved military targets” and that “we were very close to launching.”³³² However, the apparent consensus had shifted. In a meeting with other senior administration advisers, Rice wrote that she was “the lone dissenter” who “argued for proceeding with military action, as planned.”³³³ The bill to authorize U.S. military force in response to the chemical weapons attacks never made it to a floor vote in either chamber, and the plan for limited strikes was scrapped.³³⁴

While the interventionists had carried the day in Libya, the pragmatists were able to change the president’s mind in Syria. The catastrophe that followed the U.S. intervention into Libya had an enormous effect on the Obama administration’s Syrian policy. The failure in Libya was still at the forefront of the president’s mind, affecting how he and key officials viewed the viability of American military involvement in a seemingly more complex situation in Syria.³³⁵

³²⁹ Ibid, 373-74.

³³⁰ Susan Rice, “In Syria, America Had No Good Options,” *The Atlantic*, October 7, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/10/susan-rice-how-obama-found-least-bad-syria-policy/599296/>.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Ibid.

³³⁴ Congress.gov. “S.J.Res.21 - 113th Congress (2013-2014): Authorization for the Use of Military Force Against the Government of Syria to Respond to Use of Chemical Weapons.” September 10, 2013. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/senate-joint-resolution/21>.

³³⁵ Henrikson, *Cycles*, 272.

In October 2013, after international negotiations between the U.S. and Russia, the Assad regime relented and agreed to turn over its stockpile of chemical weapons to the UN for destruction under the auspices of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons.³³⁶ As the weapons were destroyed, the Obama administration's strategy toward Syria significantly cooled until mid-2014.³³⁷ The arrival of ISIS on the international stage significantly complicated the situation on the ground. The White House eventually agreed to send military advisors to train forces and aid Kurdish rebels in the fight against the Islamic State.³³⁸ President Obama, three-and-a-half years into the Syrian civil war, eventually ordered air strikes against ISIS forces, but "kept regular 'boots on the ground' out of the fight."³³⁹ He would pass down this chaotic conflict to his successor when he left office in 2017.

Limitations and Alternative Explanations

My research is limited by the availability of archival information. While I was able to access a great number of records, especially from the earlier presidencies, many of the necessary records are still classified or otherwise restricted under the Presidential Records Act and Freedom of Information Act. Moreover, some records are not open to the public, and must be accessed on-site, which I was unable to do due to public health restrictions. When possible, I relied upon secondhand accounts of pertinent records, either through administration memoirs or other journalistic and scholarly works.

My investigation is further limited by the other evidentiary sources chosen. For example, when archival material was unavailable, I relied upon the memoirs of key administration officials.

³³⁶ Ibid, 277.

³³⁷ Ibid, 278.

³³⁸ Ibid, 282.

³³⁹ Ibid, 283-84.

While these works are often rich in detail, bias and potential revisionism are inherent risks in relying upon them for evidence. Interviews and public statements have a similar issue, as officials may not be completely honest in their opinions and preferences when on the record.

Alternative explanations of intervention behavior in the literature include democratization efforts, the protection of human rights, and security issues.³⁴⁰ Some scholars argue that the U.S. has intervened in other states in an effort to promote democracy.³⁴¹ While this rationale may be supported by official rhetoric, in practice, this does not adequately explain American intervention after the Cold War. Democracy promotion was not an objective in the Persian Gulf War, nor was it necessarily the main justification in Bosnia or Libya. Other researchers have argued that American intervention behavior is underpinned by the desire to protect and promote human rights around the world.³⁴² While this framework can potentially explain American involvement, especially in Bosnia and Libya, it does not explain why the U.S. decides not to intervene in similar situations, such as the refusal to stop chemical weapons attacks in Syria. Realist frameworks are also used to explain the intervention practices of the United States. These arguments revolve around the idea that the U.S. is more likely to interfere to protect its vital security interests, including combatting terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.³⁴³ While it may potentially explain U.S. involvement in Iraq and Libya, it does little to explicate involvement in Bosnia, nor does it explain why the U.S. did not intervene in Syria, a state that posed a greater security threat than Libya.

³⁴⁰ Choi and James, "Why Does the United States Intervene," 904.

³⁴¹ Ibid, 904-905.

³⁴² Ibid, 904.

³⁴³ Ibid.

I argue that the end of the Cold War presented U.S. elite advisors with a unique opportunity in the foreign policy arena, allowing them to pursue personal policy preferences rather than focus on the singular threat of a hostile superpower. I believe these preferences are the best explanatory factors of the decision to intervene.

Conclusion

The end of the Cold War and eventual dissolution of the Soviet Union shocked the world, changing the composition of the international system and fundamentally shifting the focus of American foreign policy. The collapse of its foremost rival in world politics drastically expanded the options facing U.S. policymakers, allowing them to pursue personal preferences without the constraints of anti-Soviet or anticommunist doctrines. Through an examination of the first four presidencies in the post-Cold War era, I argue that the decision to intervene in another state is based upon these policy preferences. From national security advisors to secretaries of state and defense, elites within the executive branch have enormous influence over the president, and thus over U.S. intervention strategy.

A potential further avenue of research would be an exploration of intervention strategy before and after the September 11 attacks. As a pivotal moment in U.S. history, a valuable inquiry could be made into how the practice of intervention has changed and been justified by policymakers in the aftermath. Another similar investigation could be made into the intervention policies of other states to understand how other governments make the decision to intervene. Similarly, future researchers may explore the difference in intervention strategy between authoritarian and non-authoritarian regimes.

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